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## **Harlem's Superhero: Social Interaction, Heterogeneity of Thought, and the Superhero Mission in Marvel's Luke Cage**

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**Harlem's Superhero: Social Interaction, Heterogeneity of Thought, and the Superhero Mission in Marvel's *Luke Cage***  
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**By Justin F. Martin, Whitworth University**

**ABSTRACT**

The essay extends previous *Luke Cage* scholarship by analyzing him through a discipline rarely utilized in superhero scholarship: developmental psychology. Using the *Luke Cage* television series, the author centers Luke Cage's relationship to Harlem. In doing so, the author explores how the relationship can elucidate both the conceptual foundations of morally-relevant decision-making and the ways these concepts may be applied in varied and complex social interactions—features of social life relevant to everyday persons as well as superheroes working within a fictionalized neighborhood.

**Keywords:** Luke Cage, Superheroes, Marvel, Development, Morality, Society, Popular Culture

**El héroe de Harlem: interacción social, heterogeneidad de pensamiento y la misión del superhéroe en Marvel**

**RESUMEN**

El ensayo amplía la erudición anterior de *Luke Cage* al analizarlo a través de una disciplina rara vez utilizada en la erudición de superhéroes: la psicología del desarrollo. Utilizando la serie de televisión *Luke Cage*, el autor centra la relación de *Luke Cage* con Harlem. Al hacerlo, el autor explora cómo

la relación puede dilucidar tanto los fundamentos conceptuales de la toma de decisiones moralmente relevantes como las formas en que estos conceptos pueden aplicarse en interacciones sociales variadas y complejas: características de la vida social relevantes tanto para las personas comunes como para los superhéroes. trabajando dentro de un vecindario ficticio.

**Palabras clave:** Luke Cage, Superhéroes, Marvel, Desarrollo, Moralidad, Sociedad, Cultura Popular

哈莱姆区的英雄：社会互动、思想异质性以及漫威《卢克·凯奇》中的超级英雄使命

#### 摘要

本文使用发展心理学分析卢克·凯奇，对关于他的以往研究进行了扩展。发展心理学很少用于超级英雄研究。作者将《卢克·凯奇》电视剧作为研究对象，聚焦于卢克·凯奇与哈莱姆区的关系。为此，作者探究了这种关系如何阐明道德相关决策的概念基础，以及这些概念如何应用于各种复杂的社会互动，即与“在虚构社区内工作的普通人和超级英雄”相关的社会生活特征。

关键词：卢克·凯奇，超级英雄，漫威，发展，道德，社会，大众文化

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Premiering in the comic *Hero for Hire* (1972-1973) and recently popularized in the Marvel series *Luke Cage* (2016-2018), Luke Cage is one of the most socio-polit-

ically significant black superheroes ever created (Nama 53-54). The comic introduces Carl Lucas, an African American man who was imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. While imprisoned, he is subjected to abuse and manipulation at the hands of a white corrections officer, Albert Rackham. Scientists at the prison are conducting cell-regeneration experiments on prisoners, and, under the belief that volunteering would increase his chances of an early release, Carl agrees to do so. Rackham, however, sabotages the experiment, resulting in two consequences, eventually "placing" him in Harlem, a neighborhood in upper Manhattan. Not only is the initial goal of the experiment achieved; his skin is now effectively bulletproof. Moreover, he uses these new abilities to escape from prison. Now donning the name Luke Cage and struggling to make it economically, he decides to become a hero for hire to make ends meet.

He is also a popular superhero, as evidenced by (1) multiple comic book runs, (2) being a frequent team member partnering with other New York heroes such as Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Iron Fist, and Spider-Man, (3) joining superhero groups such as New Avengers and Defenders, (4) appearing in multiple animated series, and (5) being one of the few superheroes to be adapted for a prose crime novel in 2025 (Drum). Scholars also note the significance of a superhero who identifies with working class concerns, is well-read, reluctant to use violence, and experiences a range of emotions and relational strategies (Fawaz 191-193; McMillen 462-465; Toliver 623-624). As a street-level superhero whose mission often revolves around the issues and concerns of everyday people, he is viewed as a man of the people. There is a belief that his upcoming mini-series, in which he is the mayor of New York, has the potential to portray the superhero mission from a different perspective, and thus justify a longer

series (Donohoo). Scholars suggest that another important aspect of his appeal is that he also functions as a “cultural ethnographer” (Fawaz 191) such that understanding his superhero mission requires an understanding of the sociocultural context in which it emerges and evolves (Fawaz 128, 191-193; Nama 65). For Luke Cage, this context is Harlem, and *Luke Cage’s* portrayal of this dynamic relationship results in a grounded, multifaceted superhero narrative. A narrative that sees Luke Cage altering and being altered by the community he commits to protecting.

### A RELATIONAL SUPERHERO

Although to-date scholarship on Luke Cage focuses, understandably, on more macro level implications of his constitutive features and narrative arcs, the author argues that he is just as relevant when analyzed at the micro level. The acknowledgment these levels often interact notwithstanding, the paper focuses on the latter’s value for scholarly analyses of superheroes like Luke as portrayed in Marvel’s *Luke Cage* television series. Specifically, through examining his social interactions and the community in which these interactions take place, the paper argues that in addition to fulfilling an important social function of the superhero—which is to preserve the public sphere (Miczo 3)—he is frequently and significantly influenced by the people occupying and animating said sphere. The contours of these mutual influences are largely characterized by the actions, arguments, and beliefs of various Harlemites. These interactions are sometimes based in agreement with his superhero mission and during other times based in disagreement with his mission. The paper also argues that by and large, these interactions concern the relationship between moral and nonmoral considerations more broadly and between moral and legal considerations more specifically.

Before proceeding, it is important to consider, albeit briefly, the ways macro analyses of *Luke Cage* can relate to micro analyses. In "Take It Personal" (1.10), for instance, Luke is framed for killing a white cop, and the police department engages in a massive campaign of racial profiling and roughing up citizens to obtain information on Luke's whereabouts. Events reach a crescendo when, amid interrogating a minor without a legal guardian present, a black cop proceeds to beat the young boy to a pulp to obtain some information on Luke.

And with a street war brewing in season two instigated by the Stylers, a Jamaican gang in Brooklyn led by John McIver (Bushmaster) preparing to take over Harlem, detective Mercedes (Misty) Knight—a frequent interlocutor who oscillates between Luke Cage critic and collaborator—voices her concerns about the government's potential response to her boss, captain Thomas Ridenhour. She worries about the potential civil and human rights violations Jamaicans in Brooklyn and Harlem will likely experience if the National Guard and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) step in under the belief that local law enforcement cannot get a handle on the violence ("The Basement"; 2.6).

Phenomena related to racial profiling and immigration status, while operating at a group level, can also be understood in the context of dynamic and multifaceted social interactions between individuals. Consistent with the suggestion that the significance of Luke Cage and T'Challa is tied to the sociocultural contexts in which they live with and serve others (McMillen 470; Nama 66), previous work has employed a developmental psychology perspective to understanding Black Panther and the nation he often rules, Wakanda. This work also explores implications for viewpoint diversity more broadly (Martin 2019 24-30) and civics education more

specifically (Martin 2021a 28-32; Martin Killian and Letizia 214-215, 221-222). Martin views Wakanda as a central character in Black Panther narratives, exploring the myriad ways its citizens—although bound together through national ties—frequently disagree on matters pertaining to Wakandan law, policy, leadership, and tradition. These relational conflicts and differing perspectives help reveal, to some degree, the relationship between moral and nonmoral concepts common within Black Panther narratives (Martin 2019 22-30; Martin 2021a 27-28; Martin Killian and Letizia 209-214). The paper contends that such a relationship has similar implications for understanding Luke Cage as both defender and “product” of Harlem—with the latter term loosely construed.

Additionally, the paper explores how Luke Cage’s relationship with Harlem can elucidate the varied relationships between moral and nonmoral concepts. Like nations, neighborhoods can be construed as social ecologies, consisting of varied mixtures of individuals attempting to do life together—regardless of differences due to race, gender, social class, religious belief, cultural belief, age, political affiliation, etc. They also include a public sphere, which according to Miczo (13) is a context where a diversity of viewpoints is encouraged through communicative praxis. As such, there are myriad opportunities for individuals within neighborhoods—that, like nations, bind together individuals in some communal sense—to disagree on matters of social and moral significance. Luke Cage is not just saving lives; he’s preserving the opportunities for these lives to discuss and debate aspects of their communal existence. Considering the (1) growing body of evidence suggesting that our early human ancestors frequently negotiated between and practiced alternative forms of sociomoral organization (Graeber and Wengrow 118-119), (2) tendency for individuals within societies to eventually try to alter

social arrangements they deem unjust (Turiel 2002 288), and (3) suggestion that a person's character is best understood through an accounting of the ways they interact and talk with others (Nucci 76), the paper highlights the potential for *Luke Cage* to encourage reflection on and discussions concerning the nature of Luke's relationship to Harlem, the relationship between moral and nonmoral considerations more broadly, and the relationship between morality and the law more specifically.

The emphasis on the social interactional nature of Luke Cage's superhero mission connects to previous scholarship in multiple ways. First, it is in line with Miczo's definition of a superhero: an ethical agent whose actions are based on an empathic concern for others and take place in the public sphere characterized by plurality (3). Second, it is consistent with Morrow's analysis of the nuanced portrayal of Luke in season two, evident in his shifting orientations towards anger and violence, and how he appears to view the connection between his past and the present/future experiences when it comes to his relationships with his father and Harlem (89-90, 99). Third, the attempt to connect the analysis to larger implications concerning the relationship between moral and nonmoral considerations parallels Toliver's use of season one's depictions of various characters' literary practices to offer suggestions for how educators can use events from the series to encourage students to think about the relationship between the events, the texts referenced in the series, social norms, and understandings of Luke the person (627-628). Like Toliver, the paper suggests that Luke's superhero mission in *Luke Cage* has the potential to go beyond mere entertainment and engender critical reflection and discussion concerning matters of social importance.



Lastly, the focus on the meaning of everyday social interactions against the backdrop of macro level phenomena within a fictional Harlem is consistent with urban anthropologist John Jackson's approach to examining how broader forces such as deindustrialization and globalization inform black Harlemites' social interactions. Specifically, he explores the relationship between social interactions, behavioral criteria, and judgments bearing on one's social identity, arguing that the behavioral criteria people bring to bear when making these judgments are flexibly applied and take on different meanings depending on surrounding contextual features (3-5, 148). For instance, when analyzing the criteria Harlemites use to judge themselves and others along the lines of class (126, 158) and race (171-172, 180), Jackson found both objective or quasi-objective criteria such as occupation, phenotype, or the occurrence of racial discrimination existed alongside more subjective or interpretive criteria focused on people's behaviors toward and interpersonal relationships with others. The paper extends this notion of flexibility of thought in the realm of race and class-based judgments in the real Harlem to the realm of moral and nonmoral judgments in fictional Harlem. Specifically, *Luke Cage* is analyzed as a context for exploring heterogeneity of thought when it comes to matters of law and morality—matters frequently articulated and debated by its residents. In demonstrating and responding to this flexibility through his interactions with various Harlemites, Luke Cage serves as an embodiment of Miczo's conception of the superhero whose morally relevant actions take place within the public sphere.

Centering flexibility of thought suggests the presence of constructive processes at work within the psychology of individuals. Processes that, according to social psychologist Solomon Asch, involve the *interpenetration* of actions and

viewpoints among individuals; without which there would be no such thing as “society.” And it is through living in a society with others that individuals form a diversified understanding of human character, including both moral and immoral actions (6, 161-163). The paper’s anchoring theory, social cognitive domain theory (SCDT), takes a similar approach, elucidating the myriad ways people’s interactions with others can inform their meaning-making processes. By attributing these or similar processes to the events of *Luke Cage*, the paper elucidates the potential interrogatory affordances of Luke Cage’s superhero mission when it comes to thinking about the role of others—regardless of the nature of our relationship to them—in our understandings of self, society, and our place in it.

### A SUPERHERO'S HARLEM

With a history that includes (1) the Industrial Revolution, (2) racial covenants, (3) market forces driving the selling of houses to black Americans in mass, (4) the Great Migration of black Americans from the south to the north, (5) subsequent white flight, (6) the Harlem Renaissance, (7) the civil rights and black power movements, and (8) deindustrialization, many black people living within and outside of Harlem are aware of and draw meaning from the neighborhood’s racial significance. For many, its legacy symbolizes the best of the black community intellectually, artistically, and politically (Jackson 17-28). In his study of Harlemites, Jackson found that this symbolism plays a significant role in residents’ beliefs about and assessments of the behaviors of others, drawing on various criteria to distinguish between (1) who belongs and does not belong in Harlem and (2) living *in* Harlem versus being *of* Harlem (29-32, 37-38). This symbolic legacy, and the vigorous nature in which residents articulate and defend

its relevance for present-day social interactions, is also on display throughout the series.

In “Moment of Truth” (1.1.), for instance, Mariah Dillard (Stokes), a main antagonist in both seasons, is a politician who works with her cousin Darnell Stokes (Cottonmouth) to run a criminal enterprise specializing in weapons dealing. During an event to promote her major initiative—one that plays a prominent role throughout the first season—she describes Harlem as a “jewel of black America,” referencing important figures such as Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, Zora Neal Hurston, and Duke Ellington as evidence. Her plan is for her housing initiative, which includes the Crispus Attucks Complex, to serve as an incubator for the innovative and creative thinking of Harlem’s residents. The endgame for her initiative is revealed in “Who’s Gonna Take the Weight?” (1.3), where she tells Cottonmouth that collectively, the housing communities through her initiative, named after Crispus Attucks, Madam C.J. Walker, Adam Clayton Powell, and Shirley Chisholm, will “keep Harlem black.”

When Luke Cage is standing across the street from and observing the building soon to be the Crispus Attucks Complex, he has a gun drawn on him from presumably one of Cottonmouth’s men (“Code of the Streets”; 1.2). When he questions the young man for pulling a gun on him right across the street from a building named after one of their great heroes, the young man responds by noting that he’s a dead hero. Luke Cage then tells him about the sacrifice Crispus Attucks made for what would later become America, before drawing a parallel between this sacrifice and that of Henry (Pop) Hunter, a pillar in the community who recently died trying to save a Harlem youth. In “Just to Get a Rep” (1.5), Cottonmouth and Luke, in their eulogies for

Pop, both appeal to Harlem's significance but from different perspectives. Cottonmouth emphasizes the importance of people like Pop for appreciating and cultivating the potential of famous Harlemites like Billy Strayhorn, Teddy Riley, Big L., and A\$AP Rocky, characterizing Harlem as a place with the power to change people for the better. Luke Cage also appeals to the value of Harlemites caring for each other but focuses more on the role of community members to protect each other from those who wish to threaten their way of life. He concludes his speech by distinguishing Harlem from the people who constitute it, stating that he believes in the latter but not the former.

Lastly, in the season one finale ("You Know My Steez,"; 1.13), Luke Cage justifies his superhero-vigilante actions to the police department by appealing to what he believes to be an ethos concerning what it means to live in Harlem. As the pinnacle of black art, innovation, and politics, and a representation of hope and aspirations, Harlem's place in the world is supposed to be one of shining light. Therefore, amid a burden too big for himself and the police—the epidemic of crime threatening Harlemites' way of life and the fear residents have as a result—those with the ability to change things such as himself and the police have a responsibility to do more for the community. As he speaks, there is a shot of a mural of famous figures during the Harlem Renaissance and civil rights era.

Collectively, there are two features of the above-mentioned examples that contribute to the understanding of Harlem as an essential character within *Luke Cage* and the titular hero's superhero mission. First, consistent with Jackson's analysis of Harlemites (20-21, 29), invoking names and places is important to residents' sense of what makes Harlem special

for black Americans. The intergenerational importance of names for Harlemites' understanding of Harlem is further underscored when comparing the names Mariah references to those Cottonmouth references. Whereas most of the individuals Mariah names were prominent during the Harlem Renaissance and civil rights movement, most of the individuals Cottonmouth names were prominent in the post-civil rights era. The second feature is that whether the focus is on Harlem as a community or the selfless acts of some of its residents, there is an underlying theme amongst their beliefs about Harlem that is relational. In other words, there is a shared belief that Harlem is synonymous with the potential for a better future, which suggests better social arrangements for current and/or future generations of Harlemites. Scholars suggest that imagining different forms of social arrangements is a feature and not a bug of humanity (Graeber and Wengrow 118-119), and that people are particularly motivated to alter those arrangements construed to be unjust (Turiel 2002 288). In some ways, these features overlap, as in the case of Mariah who believes that honoring those who came before has implications for a host of new opportunities for Harlemites who, for whatever reason, may currently struggle to obtain or see those possibilities in the present. They also overlap when considering Luke Cage's emphasis on what Harlem can be when its members care for each other in more robust ways.

### **HARLEM'S SUPERHERO**

For Fawaz, superheroes' ambiguous status concerning the tension between individual agency and public life, indicated by the lack of clarity of the "range" of their morally relevant actions affords them unique opportunities to preserve the dignity and welfare of those individuals who do not feel ad-

equately served by American democracy and its associated institutions. Examples of this lack of clarity include questions about whether their actions should be bound by law, nation, planet, or galaxy (7). Similarly, Miczo contends that a definitional feature of superheroes includes their motivation or obligation to protect and preserve the public sphere, a “place” within communities for people to both pursue their interests individually and debate and deliberate matters of significance interpersonally or collectively (14). Urban folktale superheroes of the 1970s like Luke Cage represent a more socio-culturally grounded approach to the superhero mission, with their thoughts, emotions, and actions intimately informed by the locations and contexts in which they operate (Fawaz 128, 191-193; Nama 65). Thus, it is reasonable to view Harlem as an important character in Luke Cage’s superhero narrative, with his relationship to Harlem taking a symbiotic or reciprocal form.

Whether focused on comics, the television series, or both, scholars examine both Luke Cage and the social ecology in which he operates as a superhero. One area of scholarship pertains to his sociocultural and sociopolitical significance. Nama (53-55, 65-66) contends Luke’s popular culture relevance largely stems from his stylistic and narrative ties to Blaxploitation films of the 70s and the black power politics of the same era. An important aspect of these politics is a distrust of law enforcement and institutional authority.

In addition to racial politics, scholars note the character’s significance within the context of people’s everyday economic realities. Fawaz suggests that this significance, indicated by early comic book depictions of him frequently considering the final burden of superhero work and making decisions with financial implications in mind, has at least three fea-

tures or dimensions. The first concerns his symbolism via the plights of the working class more broadly. The other two concern his symbolism for the black and creative working classes respectively—the latter referring to those writers and artists creating Luke Cage comic books (191-193). For Martinez, the television series portrays a superhero morality narrative in the context of a gentrified neighborhood where everyday discourses around race and class inform and animate diverse perspectives on the issue. The show thus serves as an allegory for the opportunities and choices, both real and false, that underlie race and class considerations brought to bear on gentrification discourses (164-168). For Fawaz and Martinez, a significant reason for Luke's popularity lies in the sociopolitical implications of his narratives; implications that, in many ways, center macro or group-level phenomena such as class and race.

Class and race differences and disparities comprise most of Jackson's analysis of black Harlemites' understanding of their social identity and that of others. In both instances—their frequent interrelations notwithstanding—residents draw on a host of criteria to understand what it means to belong and not belong to a specific social category. Some of the features of social interactions residents drew on when discussing different classes include having a responsibility to help black Americans who are less well-off economically, participating in illicit activities, displaying a nasty or elitist attitude or disposition, and the nature in which one walks and talks (129-131, 133-141). Concerning racial identity, black Harlemites often discuss race in the context of black-white differences. Examples of criteria include understanding race as tied to (1) biological considerations such as phenotype and ancestry; (2) more macro social criteria such as between-group discrimination, institutions benefitting from using race to

distract people, the between-group differences in cultural production; and (3) more interpersonal or micro social criteria such as the presence or absence of “flavor,” how whites perceive blacks in Harlem, and how one walks and talks (160, 166-178). Despite the obvious differences between an urban anthropological examination of real Harlemites and a developmental psychological examination of a superhero operating in a fictional Harlem, Harlemites in both contexts express an array of views on matters of social and moral import and draw on a host of criteria they deem important in social interactions when doing so. In the context of *Luke Cage*, this viewpoint diversity is a key feature of Luke Cage's superhero mission, informing both his more straightforward decisions to help others as well as the more contentious or controversial ones.

### **LUKE CAGE (2016-2018)**

Adapting Luke Cage to the screen comes with technical affordances, in the form of both creative freedoms such as grittier depictions of social life, and medium specific features such as motion, sound, and music. These affordances result in a narrative that fuses core elements of blaxploitation films, which play a significant role in earlier iterations of the character (Nama 53-55; McMillen 455-456), and the superhero genre (McMillen 461). While making some changes, the series generally remains true to his origin in the comics as far as being framed, abused in prison, agreeing to participate in an experiment that ultimately gives him his abilities, and escaping. In the series, however, he comes to Harlem from Georgia.

In many ways, the Harlem of the series is depicted in ways consistent with Jackson's analysis. That is, Harlemites in *Luke*



*Cage* conceive of their community in ways that underscore its intellectual, artistic, and political legacy, and frequently discuss and debate what certain behaviors “mean” in the context of honoring and building upon that legacy. Given that superhero narratives commonly examine themes concerning the relationship between morality and the law (Martin 2021b 4), these considerations are often at the center of Harlemites’ disagreements when it comes to what’s best for Harlem. Unlike less socially grounded superhero narratives, however, Luke Cage is simultaneously the subject and object of these discussions in ways that, as mentioned above, make him a man of the people. Therefore, the series is as much about what Harlem means in the life of a superhero as it is about what having a superhero means to Harlem.

The first season centers around Luke Cage’s efforts to protect Harlem from multiple threats: mainly cousins Cottonmouth and Mariah, and Willis Stryker (Diamondback). These efforts occur against the backdrop of a strained relationship with law enforcement, embodied most clearly in his interactions with Misty Knight in the first 75% of the series. Initially reluctant to use his powers to help others, he eventually gets involved after one of his mentors, Pop, is gunned down trying to help a young man get out of some trouble.

In season two, in some ways Luke Cage and Harlem are at different “places.” For Luke, he is trying to balance his (1) growing fame and popularity, (2) previous success protecting Harlem, (3) economic instability in terms of personal finances and whether to monetize his brand to pay bills, and (4) newfound invulnerability to season one’s judas bullets, special bullets infused with alien technology that could harm him. In terms of Harlem, viewers are introduced to the range of crime families and organizations operating in and around

Harlem, from the Jamaicans, Italians, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Koreans, Chinese, and of course, Mariah's enterprise. Most are mentioned in season one, but they are important to season two's narrative. It is within this social ecology that one of the season's main antagonists, Bushmaster, comes to New York from Jamaica—first to Brooklyn then to Harlem—to settle an old family score with Mariah. Trying to keep the peace, first between Mariah and Bushmaster and eventually between all the crime organizations in Harlem, Luke ultimately decides to become Harlem's "king" or "diplomat" instead of its "hero" or "sheriff." In his view, by operating out of Harlem's Paradise, the club and community staple he inherits through Mariah's will, and working more closely with criminal organizations, he can broker peace in ways law enforcement cannot.

For characters with aliases, the aliases are used after first mention. Aside from Luke Cage, Mariah, Bushmaster, and Misty feature prominently in the events referenced throughout the paper. Other notable characters include Pop, Misty's partner in season one, detective Rafael Scarfe, Cottonmouth, Bushmaster's auntie Ingrid and uncle Anansi, and Hernan (Shades) Alvarez.

In line with Luke Cage's grounded nature, it is worth noting that in both seasons, he is not just dealing with solo antagonists. He is also dealing with criminal organizations who are sometimes at war with each other. In the first half of season one the focus was on Cottonmouth's criminal enterprise and, albeit to a lesser extent, Domingo Colon's. The second half, the focus shifts to the criminal conspiracies of Mariah and Diamondback. In season two, the focus is largely on those loyal to Mariah and those loyal to Bushmaster in the first 75% of the season. But once Mariah's in prison and Bushmaster

goes back to Jamaica, he is left to deal with the “control of Harlem’s criminal underworld” vacuum created by Mariah’s imprisonment, leading him to view his role as Harlem’s protector in a more nuanced light. Throughout the series, Luke is constantly negotiating his role as defender and protector with that of a peacemaker, often eliciting the help of a wide array of citizens with parts of his mission. Although the type of cooperative action taken by superheroes to defend the public sphere Miczo (3-4) highlights involves other superheroes as in the case of team-ups and groups, in the case of Luke, the aid and advice he receives from “regular” people is central to what it means for him to be a superhero.

#### **HARLEM, HETEROGENEITY, AND THE SUPERHERO MISSION**

The public sphere Luke Cage seeks to uphold by protecting Harlem is characterized by a plurality of diverse viewpoints (Miczo 13). And in the context of social life, one should expect social interactions characterized by a sort of interpenetration of viewpoints, as people influence and are influenced by others (Asch 161-163). If one assumes such viewpoint diversity is a defining feature of communities, then it is necessary to inquire about some of the conceptual building blocks of such viewpoint diversity. According to SCDT, any analysis of the nature, range, and meaning of relations between persons should start with distinguishing between three broad categories or domains of social interactions: the *psychological*, *societal*, and *moral* (Smetana Jambon and Ball 24-27; Turiel 1983 52-68; Turiel 2002 111; Turiel Killen Helwig 167-182). Considering works of and events depicted within art, entertainment, and therefore popular culture are open to interpretation, the following examples from the series are best understood as *potential* parallels to more typical social

interactions—the latter constituting prototypical domain events according to SCDT (Turiel Killen and Helwig 167, 179, 181). Prototypical events usually include one salient concept or consideration, and thus are events where, on balance, most people can agree on the nature of the act and what it means for social interaction.

It is worth noting that given the limitation inherent in analyzing a television series—namely, that only a relatively small number of events are selected among many—some events, while illustrating a concept or theme in developmental psychology, do not include Luke Cage. It is nevertheless reasonable to view these conversations as constitutive of his dynamic relationship to Harlem, considering (1) he participates in similar conversations throughout the series and (2) at some point, he interacts with most of these individuals in some capacity. Thus, conversations Misty has with others about vigilantism, for instance, could reasonably inform both her subsequent debates with Luke on the matter and his subsequent actions.

The *psychological* domain generally includes concepts bearing on personal autonomy, wants/desires, and rights in the “personal prerogative” sense. Individuals tend to view these acts as being up to the individual to decide, not contingent upon laws, rules, or local context, and not generalizable. For instance, the act of choosing to see one movie versus another generally falls within the psychological domain. Examples from the series include Luke’s decision to offer his protection services for a fee in “All Souled Out” (2.5) and Misty’s decision to work in Harlem versus somewhere else as explained in “DWYCK” (1.9). Although some events from the series discussed below implicate this domain, the purpose of this section is to explore them in the context of Harlemites’ views

on the relationship between the law and morality, encompassed by the remaining two domains respectively.

Acts belonging to the *societal* domain are generally social regulatory in nature and include concepts related to laws, rules, norms, customs/tradition, authority, and group expectations. People understand these interactions as not being up to the individual to decide, being contingent upon laws, rules, or local context, and not generalizable. Examples include following traffic laws by not parking in spaces with “no parking” signs and wearing formal attire to a wedding. In Pop’s barber shop, where Luke works, there is a social norm or rule against swearing (“Moment of Truth”; 1.1) where if you do you have to put money in the swear jar. There is also a social norm or rule against engaging in any criminal activity inside the barber shop (“Code of the Streets”; 1.2) that Cottonmouth and other criminals throughout Harlem abide by.

Lastly, acts constitutive of the *moral* domain are distinguishable from both psychological and societal events. Acts usually involve concepts concerning the inherent worth of persons, such as those related to physical and psychological welfare/harm, justice/fairness, and rights in the “human” or “inalienable” sense. People usually construe these acts as not being up to the individual, not contingent upon laws, rules, or local context, and being generalizable. A Harlemitte choosing to hit or steal from someone generally falls within the moral domain despite the existence of laws prohibiting these acts. Some themes throughout the series that are largely related to the moral domain are Luke’s decisions to physically harm criminals, Misty’s ongoing efforts to achieve justice for crime victims, concerns for civil liberties and human rights, and residents on both sides of the law lamenting and responding to the killing of innocent people.

If the previous features of social interactions provide, in a sense, a conceptual foundation for making sense of those interactions within the context of community, the following helps describe the myriad ways the application of said concepts amongst its members can “play out” in complicated or multifaceted ways. Specifically, SCDT identifies types of interactions that, unlike the prototypical or abstract events described above, are considered non-prototypical or multifaceted. These latter events, referred to as domain combinations, are considered complex or contextualized (Smetana Jambon and Ball 26-27; Turiel 1983 55, 114-129; Turiel Killen and Helwig 167-168, 179, 181, 187-188). As with the prototypical events described above, these events are illustrated throughout *Luke Cage's Harlem*.

One complex social interaction includes multiple concepts or considerations within the same domain. These *within-domain* combinations are complex in the sense that individuals can vary considerably on how they evaluate and navigate the event, depending on the weight they give one or more consideration relative to another (or others). Within the moral domain, some examples from the series come from Luke Cage's interactions with Ingrid, Bushmaster's aunt, and Mariah in season two.

Luke tries to convince Ingrid, who survived a shooting at her restaurant, to tell the police what she saw in the hopes of bringing down Mariah (“The Creator”; 2.11). But Ingrid refuses, referencing the psychological harm of reliving the traumatic event. Given Luke Cage's attempts to both bring Mariah to justice and stop the killing, both moral considerations, their discussion could be construed as a within-domain event. In the following episode, “You Can't Front On Me” (2.12), Luke is weighing whether to go to the unity

rally Mariah's hosting at Harlem's Paradise to protect her if Bushmaster shows up, given he tells her earlier in the episode that he is done working for her. On the one hand he feels he should do the right thing and protect her from potential harm but on the other hand acknowledges the near certainty that after he does so she will soon harm someone else.

Another complex social interaction includes two or more domains. *Between-domain* conflicts are suggested through the various debates characters have throughout the series concerning the merits of vigilantism. In support of her initial disapproval ("Who's Gonna Take the Weight?"; 1.3), Misty appeals to the importance of social order and formal training, considerations largely suggestive of the societal domain through regulating social behavior within group contexts. Her partner Rafael, in addition to societal considerations such as the bureaucratic inefficiencies of law enforcement and associated paperwork, also justifies his support of certain forms of vigilantism by arguing that it can prevent law enforcement officers from being harmed.

Two episodes later ("Just to Get a Rep"; 1.5), the debate continues, but this time between Misty and Luke Cage. This time, however, Misty supports her anti-vigilante stance appealing to the harm Luke's actions can eventually cause to everyone else in Harlem who are not bulletproof. Luke, like Rafael, refers to the inefficiencies of the legal system, citing prior failures to bring Cottonmouth to justice using legal means and the predictable relationship between arrests, indictments, and plea deals. He is also influenced by Claire Temple, a nurse and superhero sympathizer who eventually becomes his love interest. Although her assessment of law enforcement has a more generous tenor, she, too, appeals to the fact that they are limited in what they can do as a justifi-

cation for why Luke should do more for Harlem (“Manifest”; 1.7).

Unlike within or between-domain combinations, a *second order combination* is one where the act still generally falls within one domain. However, depending on the configuration of features surrounding the act, the implications of the act can fall within a different domain. For instance, take a situation where an individual knowingly carries a highly infectious disease that spreads easily through physical touch. In this context, a decision to wash or not wash one's hands—an act in other contexts can be understood to be up to the individual or a matter of employee policy or social expectation—can have moral implications.

Relating this idea to the series, one of the themes early on in season one—as indicated in Luke Cage's conversations with Pop in “Moment of Truth” (1.1) and “Code of the Streets” (1.2)—revolves around the moral implications of his want or desire to be left alone or not get involved in other people's affairs. Another way to construe these conversations is as reflecting second order considerations of a different sort, in terms of the moral implications of his decision to get involved in ways that operate outside the law. In season two, now clearly Harlem's superhero, a major theme revolves around the moral implications of him acting on his emotions, wants, and or desires given his abilities. As his friend Bobby Fish tells him in “I Get Physical” (2.4), he must be more careful than the average man because if he loses his psychological or emotional control over situations, people can die.

Thus, whether the conversations pertain to the decision to engage in and the merits of vigilantism, or how to balance achieving justice with preventing further harm as a vigilante, *Luke Cage* shows a Harlem grappling with the effects of large-



scale crime and the moral and legal issues embedded in trying to address it. These discussions take place amongst Harlemites who occupy varying positions within the community in terms of profession and side of the law they generally operate on. Moreover, the diverse perspectives represented in these conversations, coupled with the fact that Luke Cage discusses these issues with Pop, Misty, Mariah, and Claire on more than one occasion, suggests a particular social ecology where views are challenged and potentially updated with new information, experiences, and interactions.

### NAVIGATING COMPLEX SITUATIONS

When experiencing events with competing considerations, people often engage in processes of coordination. Coordination entails two things: an acknowledgment and weighing of multiple or conflicting considerations relevant to an event on one hand, and a resolution to the event considering this acknowledgement and weighing on the other (Nucci Turiel and Roded 318-320). In general, events requiring coordination can be construed as “dilemmas” as the multiple considerations relevant to understanding the event can make it difficult to determine how to act within, respond to, or evaluate it. At a minimum, *Luke Cage*’s frequent discussions around vigilantism suggest attempts to coordinate different considerations related to matters of law and morality.

Some scholars investigate coordination through three morally relevant social interactions: hitting/physical harm, indirect harm/stealing, and helping. Only hitting and helping are discussed given their general relevance to the superhero mission. Hitting since it involves violence or inflicting harm and helping because it relates to a concern for others’ welfare. To examine the extent children and adolescents’ thinking

about these situations might be flexible, researchers varied the hypothetical situations along two additional dimensions. One was the precipitating context surrounding the event, described as either *unconflicted*, *conflict-self*, or *conflict-other*. The other was the protagonist's relationship to the target of the act: a generalized other, a vulnerable other, or an antagonist (Turiel and Nucci 100-101; Nucci Turiel and Roded 296). Thus, children and adolescents considered the appropriate course of action in situations that varied according to the (1) social interaction, (2) conflict "embedded" in the interaction, and (3) relationship between the interactants.

Using hitting as an example, the unconflicted situation was one where the moral concept of physical harm was the most salient feature of the situation, and thus this consideration was not competing with any others. The protagonist is in a bad mood and considers hitting another child on the way home. In the conflict-self or conflicted-other interactions, the protagonist considers hitting another person in self-defense as they are being physically assaulted or hitting another person to stop them from physically assaulting another person, respectively. With respect to the relationship, the descriptions of the other person included a general boy or girl, a person who is unable to successfully navigate the situation due to disability or young age, and a person who has physically harmed or teased the protagonist in the past (Turiel and Nucci 100-101; Nucci Turiel and Roded 290-296). Due to relevance and brevity, only some of the results are summarized.

When the protagonist ponders hitting a person without provocation, most participants agree on the wrongness of hitting a person in general and hitting a vulnerable person specifically. They also tend to justify their judgments by appealing to the other person's welfare and the fair treatment of persons.

And when pondering hitting for reasons of self-defense or preventing someone from harming another, participants distinguish vulnerable from non-vulnerable persons, being less likely to judge hitting the former as acceptable (Nucci Turiel and Roded 299; Turiel and Nucci 103). In other words, responses to these events do not tend to include coordination, as it appears children and adolescents do not think there is much to weigh or balance.

When considering hitting an antagonist in unconflicted situations or non-vulnerable persons in conflicted situations, however, responses are more mixed. For the latter, the youngest children still tend to view the situations as straightforward, whereas adolescents tend to view them as more complicated. Specifically, children engage in the least coordination and older adolescents the most. When reasoning about these situations, adolescents, but not children, tend to consider the welfare and fair treatment of the person under attack, including that person's right to self-defense. There is also evidence of coordination in the former situation, as well as appeals to personal choice and reciprocity considerations when justifying the responses (Turiel and Nucci 103-104). In these situations, then, it appears that with age, participants ponder multiple considerations, some moral and others non-moral, when responding to morally relevant events.

The findings for helping are like those involving hitting in many ways. When the protagonist ponders helping someone and there is no competing consideration, children and adolescents' responses tend to be more straightforward and in the direction of helping. Second, for those who view this situation as straightforward, they are more likely to appeal to welfare and fairness considerations, a finding consistent with the justifications for not hitting in the unconflicted context.

Third, children and adolescents are just as likely to view not helping a vulnerable person negatively in the conflicted situations as in the unconflicted situation. Fourth, pondering whether to help in (1) conflicted compared to unconflicted situations and (2) unconflicted situations involving an antagonist elicit higher coordinated reasoning. Fifth, appeals to reciprocity, as with the hitting situation, are more common when thinking about helping an antagonist than when thinking about helping another person. Lastly, responses are more varied in the conflict situations and when the recipient of the help is an antagonist, and this is partly evidenced by accounting for additional considerations such as reciprocity (Nucci Turiel and Roded 301; Turiel and Nucci 105). As with hitting, therefore, all helping situations are not created equal.

Collectively, these findings suggest that by and large, youth try to make sense of multiple features of social interactions and their understandings of these interactions are tied to these meaning making processes. These findings parallel Jackson's findings on Harlemites' beliefs about Harlem, class, race, and their interrelations, as well as the viewpoint diversity concerning matters of morality and legality amongst *Luke Cage's* Harlemites. Across all contexts, it is suggested that individuals demonstrate an ability to draw up and weigh multiple conceptual understandings when articulating and defending positions of social and moral import.

Moreover, parallels can be drawn between (1) the findings on coordination, (2) *Luke Cage's* superhero mission, and (3) the Harlemites who support it, when it comes to the distinctions participants make between hitting and helping antagonists and vulnerable persons. Superhero missions are largely defined by the protection of the vulnerable or those who elicit empathic concern (Fawaz 7; Miczo 3), and this protection often comes at the expense of an antagonist or

“villain” succeeding in their plans. Therefore, it is not surprising that throughout the series, both Luke’s justification for getting involved and the justifications of the Harlemites supporting and helping him, focus on the nature of the threats to everyday life posed by the antagonists’ criminal actions and the amount of physical and psychological harm suffered by the victims. And as noted below, some of the criminals bring similar considerations to bear when refusing to go along with harming innocent people.

Sometimes social interactions are ambiguous and are thus characterized by a lack of domain clarity such that individuals are uncertain as to what conceptual domain(s) is(are) most relevant for evaluating or understanding a particular event (Smetana Jambon and Ball 26-27; Turiel 1983 55, 114-129; Turiel Killen and Helwig 167-168, 179, 181, 187-188). As a result, individuals tend to vary considerably in their understanding and evaluation of relevant actions pertaining to the event. SCDT scholars assert that part of the reason for such divergent viewpoints is found in what they refer to as informational assumptions, or beliefs about the nature of physical, social, and psychological reality (Smetana Jambon and Ball 26-27; Turiel 2002 143-144; Turiel Killen and Helwig 189-191). Another way to think about informational assumptions is that they are interpretive frameworks contributing to people’s understanding of the world, others, and their place in it.

Concerning the relationship between informational assumptions, moral understanding, and moral judgments, Wainryb’s (6) summary of general findings from multiple studies—with participants ranging from preschoolers and young adults and topics ranging from unfair treatment or resource distribution to various forms of punishment—includes three themes rele-

vant for thinking about Luke Cage's relationship to Harlem as dynamic and reciprocal. First, moral judgments are applied against a backdrop of what people construe or believe as "factual" concerning the nature of physical, social, and/or psychological reality. Second, insofar individuals apply different moral judgments to the "same" event, the differences can be at least partially understood with respect to these underlying, backdrop beliefs. Third, the frequency and nature of the disagreements notwithstanding, it is important to keep in mind that individuals are usually operating from the same abstract moral understandings. For instance, two people can differ in their views on capital punishment but agree that in general, it is wrong to intentionally harm others. Between individuals occupying the same public sphere or living in the same community in either a real or fictional Harlem, then, abstract agreement on certain matters exists alongside contextual disagreement on other matters.

Developmental research on people's beliefs in another area also bears on narrative themes throughout *Luke Cage*, especially those featuring Luke Cage and others interrogating the relationship between morality and legality: *corruption*. Adolescents and young adults were presented with corruption vignettes of two general types with four conditions. In the *baseline* bribery event, the protagonist bribes a public officer to prevent the cutoff of a public service due to not paying the bill. In the *baseline* nepotism event, the protagonist, who is a friend of the job recruiter, gets the job over better qualified candidates.

Each event included three additional conditions: *illegality*, *institutional illegitimacy*, and *survival*. In the illegality conditions, others are depicted as also engaging in those corrupt acts normatively and without negative consequences. The in-

stitutional illegitimacy conditions included institutional executives engaging in serious corrupt acts. Lastly, protagonists in the survival conditions engage in the corrupt behaviors to fulfill basic needs difficult to achieve legally. For each condition, participants provided moral, severity, tolerance, and acceptability judgments concerning the act, with the moral and tolerance justifications also being accompanied by justifications in response to a “Why?” question. After evaluating that event in the abstract, such as whether they believed bribery was a universal moral issue, they then proceeded to evaluate it across the four conditions (Martinez and Posada 4-5). For brevity, only participants’ moral evaluations and justifications are mentioned.

In line with previous findings (Wainryb 6), participants appear to approach these issues from the same abstract notions of morality. Overall, participants view the corrupt acts as morally wrong regardless of if there are no laws prohibiting them or if people commonly engage in such behaviors. They are also more likely to believe there should be a rule against bribery than against nepotism (Martinez and Posada 6). Despite generally construing these corrupt acts as immoral, adolescents and young adults do not view these corrupt acts the same, a finding suggestive of some flexibility even amidst strong moral prohibitions.

Other findings are generally consistent with previous research on the relationship between informational beliefs, moral evaluation, and moral understanding (Martinez and Posada 7-10). In these more contextualized situations, for example, participants are less likely to view bribery and nepotism as morally wrong in the three non-baseline conditions—illegality, institutional illegitimacy, and survival—than in the baseline condition. Further distinctions are made

within the non-baseline conditions. Whereas participants do not appear to distinguish between the moral permissibility of the acts across the illegality and institutional illegitimacy conditions, they are less likely to evaluate the acts negatively in the survival condition compared to both.

As with their moral evaluations, they sometimes vary their evaluation justifications in contextualized situations. For instance, their reasons for their evaluations of the acts in the illegality condition include more references to sociocultural considerations such as local beliefs and customs than reasons for their evaluations of the baseline, institutional illegitimacy, and survival conditions. Sociocultural considerations are also referenced more in the institutional illegitimacy condition compared to the baseline. Lastly, participants' reasons for their evaluations of the acts in the institutional illegitimacy condition more often appeal to mistrust, as in a lack of trust in social institutions or others, compared to the other three conditions. As the social interactions vary in their contextual features, their judgments and justifications of these interactions suggest a sensitivity to the weight and meaning attributed to those features.

As with the findings on coordination, the influences on decision making highlighted in these findings—such as the actor's beliefs, the sociocultural context, and the consequences of the act—may also inform many of the characters' interactions in the series. Insofar Luke Cage and others weigh multiple or competing considerations against each other, as with Luke Cage's apparent consideration of multiple moral and legal considerations related to vigilantism, the potential thought processes underlying their arguments and decisions could be suggestive of coordination. Similarly, his views about Harlem's social reality—including the nature of street-level and



organized crime, its threat to the public sphere, and the limits of law enforcement—reasonably inform his superhero mission and acceptability with breaking the law.

A conversation between Bushmaster—who, on multiple occasions, exchanges views with Luke Cage around the moral implications of seeking revenge—and his uncle Anansi in “The Basement” (2.6) is also relevant. When debating the merits of revenge, they articulate different perspectives on their peoples’ relationship to the United States. For Anansi, Bushmaster’s actions could make their people, Jamaican immigrants, look bad, resulting in America turning on them. Bushmaster disagrees, arguing that America turned its back on their people years ago. As with Luke Cage and vigilantism, one might argue that different construals of social reality inform their divergent views on the merits of Bushmaster’s quest for revenge. And given that Bushmaster, as with other antagonists in *Luke Cage*, do not harm people indiscriminately—a notion explored more below—his conversation with Anansi is also suggestive of the view that within morally relevant social interactions, abstract agreement exists alongside contextual disagreement.

Lastly, a thematic undercurrent throughout both seasons that makes Luke Cage’s superhero mission more challenging and nuanced is the distrust of public officials due to corruption. This distrust is palpable and animates the actions of both Luke Cage and various Harlemites. For Nama (53-55, 65-66), this kind of institutional distrust is important to understanding Luke Cage. Mariah is a corrupt politician, Rafael is revealed to be corrupt in season one (“Who’s Gonna Take the Weight?”; 1.3), and both a judge (“Straighten It Out”; 2.2) and detective Nandi Tyler (“For Pete’s Sake”; 2.9) are revealed as corrupt in season two.

These narrative themes parallel the findings on informational beliefs surrounding corruption in at least two ways. One, findings suggest that adolescents and adults perceive a relationship between sociocultural norms or beliefs and corruption at the social and institutional levels, as well as a relationship between institutional corruption and institutional mistrust. Two, they appear to be more forgiving of corruption in the context of survival. Weaving these threads together helps explain *Luke Cage's* narrative theme of corruption at the hands of public officials such as police and politicians. Insofar public corruption, crime, and institutional distrust inform many Harlemites' understanding of Harlem and their place in it, Luke Cage's superhero mission needs to be understood as coterminous with Harlemites' experiences, behaviors, and beliefs concerning these matters.

Building on the notions of distinct conceptual domains constituting the foundation by which Harlemites in *Luke Cage* relate to each other, processes related to coordination and informational assumptions elucidate how people apply these conceptual understandings to dilemmas or multifaceted situations. And although the study on coordination did not include adults, the findings are suggestive of adult capabilities. If youth can demonstrate some coordination ability, then it is reasonable to expect the adults in Luke Cage's Harlem to be able to coordinate competing considerations. By weighing multiple, often competing considerations, and drawing on construals of social reality in unclear or complicated situations, Luke Cage and his interlocutors are not only discussing and debating aspects of their communal life together; they are trying to figure out its contours. Contours that, as suggested by SCDT, Jackson, and Asch, are the result of Harlemites influencing and being influenced by each another.

### IN SEARCH OF INTERROGATORY CONTEXTS

Based on the preceding analysis, there are specific narrative themes throughout *Luke Cage* that can serve as useful contexts for exploring and interrogating the relationship between moral and societal concepts more broadly and moral and legal considerations more specifically. These include the meaning of the superhero mission, the use of violence, and people's responses to varying social arrangements. Consistent with previous scholarship on other socially grounded superheroes operating within urban communities (Martin Killen and Letizia 222-223), these interrogatory contexts can potentially elucidate how Luke Cage alters and is altered by the (re)actions, arguments, beliefs, and experiences of those whose public sphere he commits to preserving.

One interpretation of the significance of Luke Cage is that his approach to "superheroing" can potentially encourage viewers to reflect on what it means to be a superhero when one is accountable to an entire neighborhood (Martinez 166; Toliver 623) characterized by viewpoint diversity (Miczo 13-14). Illustrating this diversity, "Suckas Need Bodyguards" (1.6) opens with various people calling into a radio station to weigh in on Luke Cage's vigilantism. Unsurprisingly, a range of considerations are brought to bear on their arguments. Relatedly, there are multiple instances of known criminals being released at least once due to legal technicalities or violations, lack of evidence, or lack of ability on behalf of local police. Examples include Cottonmouth, ("Manifest"; 1.7), Shades ("Soliloquy of Chaos"; 1.12), Mariah ("You Know My Steez"; 1.13), Dontrell (Cockroach) Hamilton ("Soul Brother #1"; 2.1), Arturo (El Rey) Gomez III ("Straighten It Out"; 2.2), and Bushmaster ("For Pete's Sake"; 2.9). Given this pattern, and coupled with the examples of corrupt public officials, this debate between legal and extralegal means of

obtaining justice could serve as a useful context for exploring how moral considerations related to harm and justice not only interact with each other, but with nonmoral considerations related to legality, rules, and the (il)legitimacy of institutional authorities.

Consistent with SCDT's assertions about the dynamic and multifaceted nature of social life serving as a backdrop against which abstract, moral judgments are applied (Turiel 2002 285), Luke Cage's superhero mission is neither considered, formed, or reconsidered in a vacuum. To understand his significance as both an individual moral agent and popular culture figure, it is important to understand instances where his morally relevant actions, and the assumptions informing them, align and do not align with those in his social ecology. Such understandings, in turn, may reveal the myriad ways Luke Cage and Harlem mutually influence each other—an outcome expected over time when moral agents dynamically relate to their contexts (Nucci 74). This conception of the relationship between individuals and society shares similarities with Asch's views concerning the importance of living in a society for understanding a person's character and the interpenetration of viewpoints that take place during social interactions (6, 161-163). Put in these terms, it makes sense to view Harlem not just as a character in the larger *Luke Cage* narrative, but as an animating and dynamic influence on his superhero mission.

Along these lines, it is important to consider the various ways Harlem residents go out of their way to assist him with his mission, sometimes at a personal cost. Two notable examples come from "Soliloquy of Chaos" (1.12), which focuses on a police manhunt for Luke Cage after Diamondback frames him for the murder of a white cop. In a series of scenes, view-

ers are shown multiple black men wearing Luke Cage's signature bullet riddled hoodie to throw off the search. In another scene, a police officer corners him in an alley, but decides to let him go because he knows him from Pop's barbershop and believes in what he represents.

In terms of both the meaning of Luke Cage's superhero mission and the mutually influential nature of his relationship to Harlem, his portrayal as reflective and contemplative is also relevant. Two observations made by his prison psychologist and eventual wife Reva Connors are illustrative. The first is that, although he is in prison, he is not a prisoner ("Step in the Arena"; 1.4). The second is that he is always thinking, even when he is not engaged ("Take It Personal"; 1.10). There are times, as in "Can't Front On Me" (2.12), where he is alone, thinking about his next move and its potential implication(s) for those who live in Harlem. Moreover, throughout season one he is often portrayed as reluctant to become a hero, either preferring to be left alone or not considering oneself a hero ("Now You're Mine"; 1.11).

In her analysis of season one, Toliver (623-624) notes how earlier episodes center a range of literary practices involving Luke Cage and other Harlemites. Practices that include reading, discussing, and scenes showing books of various genres. The ubiquity of literacy practices is important, given the practical relationship between reading, thinking, and contemplating. These literacy practices are also important because on multiple occasions, they are depicted as social practices, comprising yet another way his superhero mission is informed by his interactions with others.

Another interrogatory context lies in the realm of violence. *Luke Cage's* multifaceted and nuanced portrayal of violence intimates a sort of commentary on more extreme physical vi-

olence towards others in at least two respects. As mentioned earlier, Luke Cage is initially reluctant to use his abilities to help others, and despite eventually choosing to do so, rejects, on multiple occasions, that his actions make him a “hero.” McMillen (462-465), examining both the comics and the series, notes that he is frequently shown either refusing to fight unless in self-defense or reluctantly doing so to prevent (further) harm from befalling someone he cares about. This reluctance in light of the close relationship between super heroism and violence (Martin 2021b 4-5), and his struggles with and reflections on the implications of his violent actions in season two (e.g., “Wig Out”; 2.3 and “I Get Physical”; 2.4) suggest that for him, the merger between his morally relevant mission and the violent means used to achieve it is at best an uneasy one—with both proximate and potentially distal consequences.

In addition, when encountering people shooting at him, he is frequently shown crushing the guns instead of just knocking them out of the way or using them himself. An important scene in this regard comes from “Just to Get a Rep” (1.5), where he grabs Aisha Axton’s purse during Pop’s Memorial service to, unbeknownst to her, crush the gun she has tucked in there. When, moments later, she disregards Luke telling her that she does not have to retaliate against Cottonmouth because he found the sentimental ring his men took from her, she reaches for her gun only to realize it is crushed. The importance of the series’ commentary on violence is further suggested by the fact that his use of violence in a particular context convinces Claire to live somewhere else for the remainder of season two (“Wig Out”; 2.3). Lastly, at times he is shown either (1) using his abilities to protect others *and* prevent them from killing their attackers (“Can’t Front On Me”; 2.12) or (2) being reminded, either indirectly through

people watching him (“Straighten It Out”; 2.2) or directly through people urging him to remember who he is (“Suckas Need Bodyguards”; 1.6 and “Can’t Front On Me”; 2.12), to not cross over the line and start killing people.

Luke’s Cage’s actions are not the only ones relevant to a commentary on violence. Anansi, Bushmaster’s uncle, is frequently warning Bushmaster of the dangers of his violent thirst for vengeance, despite understanding and even conceding that some form of retribution against Mariah for her family’s crimes against theirs is justified (“The Basement”; 2.6 and “If It Ain’t Rough, It Ain’t Right”; 2.8). And once kidnapped by Shades, he extends the same warning to Mariah (“The Main Ingredient”; 2.10). As Mariah’s violence escalates and innocent people die, Sugar, one of her “employees,” reaches out to Luke, and her partner Shades reaches out to both Misty (“The Creator”; 2.11) and Luke (“They Reminisce Over You”; 2.13). In each instance, they express that they are no longer working with Mariah because she has gone too far.

Although Shades explicitly mentions that he defects because of Mariah’s harming of innocent people, Sugar’s decision in “The Main Ingredient” (2.10) to not go through with walking Anansi to the restaurant—which ended up being shot up resulting in multiple casualties—implies that he too, is not comfortable harming innocent people. And despite the violence perpetrated by Cottonmouth in season one, he was visibly saddened by the death of Pops, an innocent bystander; a sentiment further underscored by his reference to the importance of adherence to presumably “moral” rules of not harming innocent people (“Code of the Streets”; 1.2) and giving a speech during his memorial (“Just to get a Rep”; 1.5). These same “moral” rules were used to justify Shades’ defection

from Mariah after shooting up the restaurant (“The Creator”; 2.11) and decision—once apparently out of the gang life—to both help Luke Cage broker peace in response to spikes in gang wars and propose that he work more closely with the crime families and organizations to do so (“They Reminisce Over You”; 2.13).

It is worth noting that, unlike Luke Cage’s interactions with Misty or other law-abiding Harlemites, his interactions with Sugar and Shades highlight how across both seasons *Luke Cage* also portrays his relationship with criminals as dynamic and mutually influential. Luke Cage eventually convinces them that he really cares about Harlem, and they eventually convince Luke Cage that his superhero mission needs to be altered to better serve Harlem. This notion of individuals exposed to robust violence—as the case with many of Luke Cage’s law-breaking interlocutors throughout the series—nevertheless prohibiting the use of violence against innocent people, is further evidence of the view that social life is characterized by the existence of abstract moral agreement in certain areas and contextual disagreement in others.

As Turiel asserts, abstract moral understandings and judgments are applied against the backdrop of diverse social arrangements and interactions, and people often try to alter these arrangements and interactions if they deem them unjust (2002 285, 288). In line with this view, another theme that can stimulate sociomoral interrogation pertains to the relationship between changing social arrangements and persons’ flexibility of thought. When it comes to Luke Cage, for instance, such interrogation or analysis may focus on his response to the disruption to Harlem’s social and criminal “ecosystem” caused by Mariah’s imprisonment. Different criminal organizations are warring with each other to fill the



vacuum left in her absence. In response to the significant increase in violence overall and towards innocent people, and law enforcement's inability to sufficiently address either, Luke Cage decides that new crimes call for new "laws" ("Can't Front On Me"; 2.12). And after serious contemplation, he decides in "They Reminisce Over You" (2.13) to become more of a "king" or "diplomat" to Harlem instead of a "hero" or "Sheriff"—a move that, as Misty notes, poses the risk of him becoming a dictator and/or a worse criminal than the vigilante he already is.

In analyzing Misty, Luke Cage's most frequent interlocutor throughout the series concerning the merits of vigilantism and the legitimacy of local law enforcement, the focus could be on her constant and complex navigation between legal and illegal means of obtaining justice. In "The Basement" (2.6), for example, she tells her boss Ridenhour that she almost planted evidence in Cockroach's apartment to prevent him from beating his girlfriend, a pattern she believes will eventually lead to her murder. Interestingly, Cockroach is one of the criminals released due to her former partner Rafael's corruption, as he planted the gun that landed him in prison. Understandably, his girlfriend, when urged by Misty to give her some intel on Cockroach so she can arrest him, partly justifies her refusal by stating she does not believe the cops can do anything ("All Souled Out"; 2.5). Misty tells Ridenhour that although law enforcement has been fighting the same war against criminals, the only thing that has changed are the *rules of engagement*. Thus, she is torn between legal means, knowing this approach will not change things, and illegal means. Choosing the latter may change things, but she will then become corrupt like Rafael; an outcome she cannot accept ("The Basement"; 2.6). As with Luke Cage, Misty constantly grapples with the complexities inherent in balancing

moral and legal considerations while serving and protecting *Luke Cage's* Harlem.

## CONCLUSION

Across both seasons, *Luke Cage* presents a superhero narrative against the backdrop of a dynamic and multifaceted relationship between Luke Cage and the neighborhood he learns to care for in a way that spurs him to use his abilities for others. These two characters, Luke Cage and Harlem, in some ways work in concert with his superhero mission and in others question, criticize, and work against it. The result is a superhero narrative suffused with nuance revealed through diverse interactions and flexible thinking in response to varying social arrangements. Throughout the series, Luke Cage emerges as a superhero who not only defends and preserves the public sphere where viewpoint diversity or thought heterogeneity is possible; he frequently engages with and is informed by said sphere through his relationship with Harlemites on both sides of the law.

Insofar as this relationship can be better understood by turning to scholarship on the development and application of social concepts across varying social interactions—especially when these processes inform discussions about the relationship between moral and nonmoral considerations in general and moral and legal issues in particular—the series, at a minimum, has the potential to go beyond mere entertainment. At best, it has the potential to stimulate viewers' reflections and discussions concerning the relationship between individuals and the societies they, as moral agents, help animate, critique, and alter through social interactions. If so, then the contours and substance of Luke Cage's superhero mission may reveal more about real communities than the fictional

community largely responsible for its cultivation and evolution.

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