

***Luke Cage* as Postpost-9/11 TV:
Spatial Negotiations of Race in Contemporary U.S. Television**

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ABSTRACT: Reading *Luke Cage* as a ‘postpost-9/11’ text with a focus on the body of the bulletproof Black male superhero, Luke, as well as the show’s setting, this paper examines the serial’s potential to negotiate social and cultural implications of American politics in response to the attacks on September 11, 2001, particularly with regard to the War on Terror’s embeddedness in long-standing histories of racism.

KEYWORDS: War on Terror; *Luke Cage*; space; 9/11; racial profiling; postpost-9/11; superhero

Look, dog, a hero never had one.
Already took Malcolm and Martin,
this is the last one.
Now we got a hero for hire
and he a Black one.
Method Man, “Bulletproof Love”

Introduction

As one of the most influential social and political phenomena in the new millennium, 9/11 has sparked a plethora of interdisciplinary studies in various fields in the past 17 years, ranging from studies of the event’s representations in various media and its political and psychological consequences to how it has been portrayed in literature and art. The iconic fall of the Twin Towers, its psychological, arguably traumatic, impact as well as its fictional (re-)imaginings have frequently occupied the center stage of many of these engagements with the event. In the comic book world, early responses to the September 11, 2001 attacks included images of shocked and sometimes even physically wounded superheroes staring at the debris of the fallen towers, oftentimes helping those identified as the “true heroes,” the New York City Fire Department (FDNY) firefighters (Quesada et al., “Stand”).¹ These comic book representations of 9/11 oscillate between two dominant narratives: On the one hand, they foreground a collective and national trauma that is inscribed on the white male bodies of prototypical American superheroes such as Captain America, Spiderman, and Superman.

¹ Prominent examples include *The Amazing Spiderman* vol. 2, no. 36 (2001) as well as *Captain America* vol. 4, no. 1 (2002).

On the other hand, a narrative of national strength and male heroism in response to this national trauma becomes visible, stressing the alleged necessity to abandon any thoughts of surrender and instead fight the ostensibly malicious ‘Other’ deemed responsible for the attacks. Patriotism and nationalism are at the core of these narratives, and have converged in response to the attacks to foster racist and xenophobic tendencies, visualized particularly by the extensive use of patriotic imagery, such as the showcasing of the American flag. This opportunistic logic, so evidently reflected in the legislation passed in the United States shortly after the attacks — the *USA Patriot Act* (2001) or the *Homeland Act* (2002) —, is perhaps most pointedly summarized by Captain America in an inner monologue in the first edition of his comics published after the 9/11 attacks:

We’ve got to be stronger than we’ve ever been — as a people. As a nation. We have to be America. Or they’ve won. We’re going to make it through this — we, the people. United by a power that no enemy of freedom could begin to understand. We share — we are — the American Dream. (Quesada et al., “Enemy”)

Moreover, many of the comics explicitly link the two dominant narratives of national victimhood and of national strength to both the city space of New York and the body of the white, male, able-bodied superhero. Stylized as a site of the War on Terror, it is not only New York’s cityscape, but also the superhero’s body, that becomes a space of negotiation for these two narratives. In line with the two narratives that dominated post-9/11 comic books, the predominantly white Bush administration attempted to justify Islamophobic practices after the events in 2001. In contrast, the 2016 Netflix series *Luke Cage* highlights that these events have merely provided the occasion to legitimize racialized state violence, which is, in fact, yet another manifestation of institutional and structural racism that existed in the United States long before the alleged watershed moment 9/11. *Luke Cage* portrays a version of New York City after September 11, 2001 in which the history of (national) victimhood runs deeper the further we stray from Lower Manhattan. Here, questions of race and empowerment are refracted and re-articulated in the aftermath of the attacks, and America’s ideological responses to 9/11 are re-contextualized through the perspective of a Black male superhero. *Luke Cage*, this article argues, addresses the legacy of 9/11 through the historicity of its Harlem setting and through the bulletproof Black body of the serial’s eponymous protagonist. As a result of experiments conducted on him while he was falsely imprisoned, Luke’s bulletproof body constitutes a symbolic space in which the perpetuation

of state violence against racialized bodies in the United States is negotiated. Unlike the legions of Marvel's white cinematic superheroes, in its mode of challenging foundational assumptions of the political War on Terror discourse, *Luke Cage* can be understood as an example of what I shall call 'postpost-9/11 television.' The distinction between post-9/11 and postpost-9/11 modes is central to my understanding of *Luke Cage* as diverging from the responses to 9/11 in the aforementioned comic book editions as well as in other literary and cinematic texts.

Post-9/11 vs. Postpost-9/11 Modes

Many of the early responses to September 11, 2001 can be described as attempts to come to terms with the event itself, suggesting that the attacks caused a (collective) trauma whose meaning and impact cannot be easily processed. As a consequence, post-9/11 literature can broadly be categorized as literature that attempts to grasp the event itself and its aftermath, to understand the meaning of the attack and its traumatic implications. These texts, however, are increasingly subjected to criticism. According to Richard Gray, in an attempt to comprehend 9/11, they often "simply assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures" (30), for example by domesticating the crisis in novels such as Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), or Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007). While approaching the psychological and semiotic implications of 9/11 is significant and necessary, Gray convincingly argues that many texts "[betray] a response to crisis that is eerily analogous to the reaction of many politicians and the mainstream American media after 9/11: a desperate retreat into the old sureties" (16), such as propagation of American exceptionalism or traditional gender roles. Paul Petrovic rightly criticizes that these texts "overly fetishized national victimhood" (x), and, I would add, the patriotic white male heroism that is depicted in many comic books of the post-9/11 era. TV series such as *24* (2001-2010), the *CSI* franchise, and movies like the thriller-drama *United 93* (2006) are commercially successful and award-winning examples of how these tendencies translated directly into audiovisual texts.

Overall, these early responses are inclined to promote rather clear-cut Manichean binaries that have frequently informed the hegemonic War on Terror discourse and its justifications. They tend to operate with categories such as 'evil terrorist' and 'good war hero/freedom fighter,' which are treated as presumably stable entities, and which can be located at the

core of purposive legitimation strategies after September 11, 2001.² This certainly does not mean that texts that have criticized U.S. actions in the War on Terror are entirely absent. However, in their critique, authors of post-9/11 texts indiscriminately rely on the same categories as texts that are affirmative of these actions. Hence, even critical texts tend to work within the same discursive framework. A typical example for this mode of engaging with September 11, 2001 and its aftermath are texts that criticize the treatment of ‘terrorist suspects,’ for instance their torture in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay. While critical of the practices, these texts hardly ever call into question the concept of ‘terrorism’ and its epistemic construction: Who is seen as a terrorist? Who decides why a person is categorized as a terrorist, and on which basis? Nor are they attuned to the inherent racialization of the War on Terror discourse: Why is the concept of the lone sociopath so often invoked in news outlets when a white person is the perpetrator in what would otherwise certainly be labeled a terrorist attack? Although the criticism of the action itself — here the torture of terrorist suspects — is undoubtedly necessary, these post-9/11 texts neglect to criticize the underlying epistemic categories and their attendant racializations that form the basis for such gruesome actions in the first place. Post-9/11 texts fail to do so and thus become, I would argue, part of this discourse themselves — despite the fact that some of them forcefully oppose the *practices* of the War on Terror.

This article focusses on a different, a postpost-9/11, mode of engagement that can also be found in audiovisual and written texts published after the 9/11 attacks. The strategies used in these texts offer more nuanced interrogations not only of the attacks themselves but also of their sociopolitical aftermath. Operating in a highly self-reflexive manner, such texts challenge and subvert their own reliability by pointing towards internal constraints and contradictions as well as towards their own complicity in post-9/11 discourses. Rather than merely scrutinizing political and legal decisions made during the War on Terror, postpost-9/11 texts impeach the simple, affective dichotomies that have provided the discursive basis for these decisions. Such postpost-9/11 texts are thus keenly aware of the constructedness of categories such as ‘terrorist’ that are at the core of the dominant political discourses of the post-9/11 era.

² George W. Bush’s statement “You are either with us, or with the terrorists” used in his address to a joint session of Congress and the nation on September 20, 2001 perhaps most adequately captures the binary thinking that dominated the post-9/11 political discourse.

It is relevant to note that the division between these two different strands is not primarily temporal. I do not understand texts that exhibit a postpost-9/11 mode as a later form of post-9/11 texts whose origin can be traced to a specific turning point in the post-9/11 era, as there is no such watershed moment. The distinction between the two is to a greater degree based on their strategies of engaging with 9/11 and its aftermath rather than grounded in their production time. Borrowing from Stuart Hall's deliberations on the meaning of 'post' in 'postcolonialism,' I argue that the shift between post-9/11 texts and postpost-9/11 texts does not constitute a mere periodical break, or 'after' in a structuralist sense, but, rather, presents a "going beyond" (Hall 253) other forms of engaging with these events. Consequently, there are strong overlaps and certain continuities between the two modes of engagement that can often be found in one and the same text.³

Given the narratological complexity needed to negotiate these nuances of the War on Terror discourse, all of the texts that I categorize as postpost-9/11 television could certainly also be subsumed under Jason Mittell's highly influential concept of 'complex TV.' Complex TV, according to Mittell, describes "a changing landscape of American television, where complex and innovative storytelling can succeed creatively and economically" (2). All series I categorize as postpost-9/11 certainly employ many, if not most, narrative strategies identified by Mittell, yet narrative complexity does not by itself guarantee a deconstructive self-reflexivity with regard to 9/11 and the War on Terror. In fact, only a very small portion of complex TV shows exhibits postpost-9/11 features, and series such as *Alias*, *24*, or *Homeland*'s later seasons that qualify as complex TV are firmly rooted in a simple post-9/11 framework. Moreover, while Mittell acknowledges the influence of the emerging War on Terror on developments in the television industry after 2001, he explicitly refrains from focussing on "analyzing meanings as conveyed by television narratives" (4). In contrast, my analysis of postpost-9/11 TV explicitly centers on the meaning of such complex television

³ The first season of Showtime's *Homeland*, for instance, exemplifies how the plot of a TV serial can subscribe to the dominant discourse, promoting Islamophobia and racist stereotypes, while the show's cinematography, particularly the non-linear unreliable narration, challenges the narrative's overall reliability as well as the end-justifies-the-means mentality that the serial seems to endorse. Although the serial ultimately confirms that the male protagonist, Nicholas Brody, is a so-called 'terrorist,' throughout the first season, *Homeland* also negotiates the constructedness of this label and exposes the ways in which this construction is tied to social and political power struggles. Thereby, the serial deconstructs those simplistic binary categories it seemingly reproduces, and thus exhibits a powerful postpost-9/11 subtext.

series in relation to a post-9/11 discourse in a wider sense. In order to understand the ways in which they challenge foundational assumptions of the post-9/11 era, it is essential to not only take into account the doubtlessly complex narrative strategies these texts employ but — perhaps primarily — to examine the ways in which these techniques are used to dismantle meaning-making processes in the War on Terror. Within the transmedia behemoth known as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), its more nuanced Netflix offshoots like *Luke Cage* signal a departure from ‘traditional’ post-9/11 feature films and embrace, as I argue, a postpost-9/11 sentiment.

(Post)Post-9/11 Marvel

Marvel’s 2012 blockbuster movie *The Avengers* concluded the first phase of its transmedial world-building and features the so-called ‘Battle of New York’ as its final showdown: a confrontation between the Chitauri, an army of alien warriors, and Marvel’s eponymous superhero team. Through its spatial practices, the film visually spells out its parallels to the attacks on September 11, 2001 as skyscrapers and considerable parts of Manhattan are destroyed. While the movie points to internal conflicts among some of the superheroes preceding the battle, they stand united once the city is under attack. The physical monstrosity of the literally alien invaders emphasizes their ‘otherness,’ thus clearly upholding the dichotomy between the ‘good (Western) Self’ and the ‘evil (terrorist) Other’ that has predominated post-9/11 politics in both the ‘real’ world and in the aforementioned (comic) books.⁴

Marvel’s Netflix series *Luke Cage*, *Jessica Jones*, and *Daredevil* are all set after the Battle of New York. I argue that it is precisely this catastrophic incident in the shared Marvel universe which provokes renegotiations of space and identity through various lenses such as race (*Luke Cage*), (dis)ability (*Daredevil*), and gender (*Jessica Jones*) as depicted in Marvel’s individual television series. Deviating from the norm of the white, male, able-bodied superhero, their social positionalities determine the ways in which the protagonists move within the city space of New York. In contrast to the MCU’s macrocosm, i.e. the cinematic depiction of the storyworld in the movies, Marvel’s latest TV serials are interrelated

⁴ In the aforementioned *Spiderman* comic, even the villains are presented with tears in their eyes, shocked by the scope of the destruction of 9/11, which has not only contributed to the humanization of these characters but, primarily, to the dehumanization of the ultimate ‘evil terrorist Other.’

microcosms within the same universe which make visible those spaces that have been only indirectly affected by the attack and which remain unseen in the movies. They thereby counter the limited visual representation of post-9/11 New York, which is characterized almost exclusively by images of what Suheir Hammad calls “New York south of Canal Street.” On the other hand, the now-visible spaces in the shows also provide different analytical angles on the transformed ‘post-incident’ American society and the issues with which it struggles.

Luke Cage as Postpost-9/11 Television

In *Luke Cage*, its Harlem setting creates a literal space in which Black cultural heritage can not only be located but in which it can also be revisited in order to negotiate challenges the United States have faced since 9/11. Foremost among these challenges, as I have indicated earlier, is the racialization that has become a core tenet of the post-9/11 era, manifest in the question of racial profiling in the show. In the MCU, Luke Cage is a Black superhero with impenetrable skin and superhuman strength who first appeared in the first season of *Jessica Jones*. After being wrongfully convicted of murder under his original name Carl Lucas, he escaped from prison, changed his name into Luke Cage, and now uses his powers to fight crime in Harlem, personified in the first season by Cornell “Cottonmouth” Stokes, his cousin Mariah, and Luke’s half-brother, “Diamondback.” As the franchise’s first Black superhero protagonist on screen long before the release of the highly acclaimed *Black Panther* movie, Luke is a forerunner as a hero who “fights to preserve Black culture,” as Samantha Blackmon convincingly argues (98).⁵ This is particularly relevant against the backdrop of the “whiteness of a United States hegemonic frame” (Frankenberg 554) that is ever-present in the aforementioned comic books and the early movies in the MCU. In this context, Ruth Frankenberg’s claim that “whiteness is inherently connected, in its own view, with narratives of innocence, goodness, Godliness and strength” (559) is reflected in the trope of the white, male superhero that has come to save the traumatized American nation after 9/11 — a notion that Luke clearly subverts.

⁵ Luke Cage is the first Black superhero protagonist in the Marvel movies. However, in mainstream U.S. comics, the Black Panther T’Challa appeared before any other superhero of African or African American descent in 1966, i.e. six years prior to the first appearance of Luke Cage in the comics in 1972.

One of the ways in which this nation-as-victim narrative has been repeatedly employed is to justify increased surveillance of people fitting an allegedly stereotypical Arab and/or Muslim American outward appearance after September 11, 2001. Enhanced surveillance and racial profiling was constructed as a mere *response* to the attacks: The dominant narrative of the Bush administration and many U.S. media outlets contended that the United States had been attacked by people whom they vaguely identified as ‘Muslim Arabs,’ and they thus deemed it necessary to increasingly monitor people who allegedly fit this category in order to prevent another such an attack from happening.⁶ The inductive causality that is seemingly established here between the events in 2001 and the reaction to them — a specific form of racial, and racist, profiling — conveniently corresponds with white supremacist notions of racial hierarchization. This form of justification, which presents itself as a rational *response*, in fact, promotes general suspicion geared towards people who were not in any way involved in the attacks, and uses the occasion to legitimize racist tendencies, which have arguably been constitutive of American society for centuries. As Evelyn Alsultany convincingly argues, “the logic that 9/11 is an exceptional moment of crisis — and therefore demands exceptional measures — becomes crucial in producing a new kind of racism, one that purports to be antiracist while perpetrating and justifying racism” (50). What is “new”

⁶ The term ‘Arab and Muslim Americans’ is not as much an ontological categorization but an attempt to counter the conflation of Arab, Muslim, and various, predominately Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA), identities as ‘Muslim Arabs’ in dominant U.S. political and media discourses (Naber 5-8; Alsultany 9-10). At least since the Iran hostage crisis, the constructed group has been subjected to widespread surveillance, racial profiling, and persecution, which further intensified in the wake of September 11, 2001 despite the linguistic, religious, and ethnic heterogeneity of the affected communities. It is worth citing Alsultany at length on the consequences of grouping together diverse communities under the moniker of ‘Muslim Arabs’:

This conflation enables a particular racial Othering that would not operate in the same way through another conflation, such as, for example, Arab/Christian, Arab/Jew, or Indonesian/Muslim. The result is particularly damaging, since it reduces the inherent – and enormous – variety of the world’s Muslim population, projecting all Muslims as one very particular type: fanatical, misogynistic, anti-American. This recurring conflation, advanced by U.S. government and media discourses at this historical juncture, serves a larger narrative about an evil Other that can be powerfully and easily mobilized during times of war. (9)

The differentiation employed in this article between Arab and Muslim Americans thus serves to counter the stereotypical homogenization so often found in contemporary public debate. At the same time the term addresses – without claiming to resolve – the complexities that result from a wide range of overlapping identities and self-identifications as Arab, as Muslim, both, or, in the case of non-Muslim, non-Arab minorities in or from North Africa and Southwest Asia, as neither (even though the latter are problematically often grouped among the former). In using the term, or various derivations, I have attempted to be, as Alsultany advises (10), specific whenever possible, and to point out unwarranted, at times racist, generalizations that are the result of the dominant, white, hegemonic discourse.

here, are the discursive strategies used to legitimize pre-existing perpetual racism, thereby stylizing September 11, 2001 as a watershed moment in U.S. history. As a consequence of this ‘logic’ of 9/11 exceptionalism, the precarious position Muslims and Arab Americans found themselves relegated to “firmly brands [them] as the racial, religious, political, and national Other of a hegemonic US national identity” (Fadda-Conrey 1).

Of course, the legitimacy of racial profiling of Arab and Muslim Americans has been rightly questioned in many post-9/11 texts. On ethical and moral grounds, these texts have criticized enhanced surveillance of this group based on fear of another attack. However, post-9/11 texts have only ever examined whether this form of profiling is an *adequate* response to the attacks, but not whether it *is* a response in the first place. In other words, they have still operated within the same discursive framework, never evaluating racial profiling as a practice deeply engrained in the workings and traditions of the American security apparatus that, over the course of the past four centuries, has drawn upon many similar legitimizing strategies. As such, authors of these texts have unwittingly left room for other racist endeavors to use the same discursive strategy — identifying a threat to the nation’s security and authorizing (racist) practices as a response to stem the problem — with U.S. President Donald Trump introducing a so-called Muslim ban under the same pretenses as merely the latest example.

In contrast to this, I argue that *Luke Cage* uses its spatial practices to stress that racial profiling is, in fact, embedded in longstanding histories of racism in the United States. The series thus highlights continuities that the political post-9/11 discourse is keen to suppress. While it is not my intention to diminish or equate specific experiences of different racialized communities, I nevertheless think that an analysis of *Luke Cage*’s spatial practices can help dismantle the illusion of racial profiling as a mere response to the events of 2001. In twinning the collective, historical experiences of Black America with the particular mode of post-9/11 profiling of Arab and (non-Black) Muslim Americans, the show challenges one of the foundational assumptions of the War on Terror discourse: the notion of 9/11 as an “exceptional moment of crisis” (Alsultany 50), as a watershed moment that necessitates unprecedented racial profiling as its equally exceptional response.

In its introductory credits, *Luke Cage* establishes an explicit connection between Luke's racialized body as a space of negotiation and the material city space of Harlem, NY, which is projected onto his skin in the form of Harlem landmarks and street signs. Street names such as the "Malcolm X Boulevard," projected onto Luke's clenched fist in the intro, emphasize how the show actively positions itself in narratives of Black emancipation and civil rights struggles – and how Luke's physical strength is symbolically infused with the power of his ideological forbearers. The show also exhibits various intertextual references to the Harlem Renaissance, to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, to the Civil Rights Movement, and to slavery, as well as to Black music cultures. A variety of rap, hip-hop, and soul artists perform on the show, particularly on the stage of a successful night club named 'Harlem's Paradise.' Although sometimes only briefly alluded to, this variety of cultural and textual references nevertheless underlines the historically rooted diversity of contemporary Black culture. Harlem is depicted in the show as a space in which Black culture exists in different facets and in interaction with its residents.

This diversity is also emphasized by the show's multiple Black focalizers and their entirely different agendas and social backgrounds. Rather than perpetuating the notion of a homogenous Black community, the series points to tensions within this perceived community and gives voice to individual experiences inside this racialized group. As a result of this focus on complex representation, some of the characters on the show are Black villains — characters still conspicuously absent in most comic books. Mariah, a Black female politician, is one such character. She is given an extensive back story dating to her childhood in Harlem, filled with traumatizing experiences that shed light on her development as a complex and strong female character without redeeming her criminal actions.

By depicting a diverse range of Black characters, the show demonstrates how systemic racism affects the lives of Black people regardless of their social positionality. The serial references interrelated issues such as Black mass incarceration, the legacy of slavery, police brutality, gentrification, human rights struggles, and, of course, racial profiling in the United States — and it does so through the way it deals with space, as the show's settings continuously spark conversations about these issues. As part of her political campaign, Mariah calls for a "New Harlem Renaissance," using the space of Harlem and references to

its architecture and history to address the necessity of preserving Black culture. Mariah certainly performs her Harlem identity to forward her political career and purposefully stages most of her interviews in front of Harlem's brownstone buildings and parks. The multiple long shots that are used in these scenes foreground the beauty of Harlem, but the scenes also bring to mind that Mariah's call to preserve Harlem as a space is inextricably linked to preserving Black lives as well. "For Black lives to matter, Black history and Black ownership must also matter" ("Moment" 37:02-37:05), she argues, playfully substantiating some of the explicit demands of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Mariah foregrounds that the movement not only demands protection for Black bodies, but that the discrimination that African Americans face reaches far beyond this imminent threat to their lives. She thereby points to the movement's quest for recognition of humanity in its most profound sense, and identifies a variety of levels on which institutionalized racism occurs and on which it consequently needs to be tackled: social, financial, historical, and cultural, to name but a few.

It is striking that Harlem's urban space serves as the starting point for a discussion about racism in the United States that exceeds the discussion in dominant U.S. media outlets today. Particularly Mariah's demand that Black history must be recognized points to the ongoing erasure of both a history of slavery and perpetual racism as well as a history of Black struggles against these injustices. The doubtlessly specific and singular experience of Black Americans in the United States, however, also points to a larger tradition of Western historiography that continuously peripheralizes and erases experiences of those who are marginalized — and, given police brutality and vigilantism, are often literally erased — in society as well. As Nadine Naber has convincingly argued in the introduction to the seminal edited collection *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, this tendency also applies to Arabs and Arab Americans as they are often perceived as a "people without history" (2). With reference to the city space of Harlem, *Luke Cage* thus illuminates processes of marginalization in the United States that transcend racial boundaries.

In countering this historical erasure, the show puts emphasis on the achievements of Black Americans in their fight for civil rights, social equality, and cultural recognition. Standing in

front of the Crispus Attucks building, Luke enters a conversation with one of Cornell's gang members about the use of the n-word in the Black community. The scene opens with a low-angle shot circling Luke, who is currently reconnoitering the building in which Cornell's money is presumably hidden. Yet, due to the external ocularization and focalization, the object of Luke's observation is not revealed at first. The camera only switches to an over-the-shoulder shot when one of the gang members threatens Luke with a gun to his head. This initial lack of vision and knowledge on the part of the viewer allows the show to draw attention to the space itself, whose connection to struggles of liberation is made explicit in the conversation. The dialogue between Luke and Cornell's employee is sparked only because the characters are located in this specific, historically-charged space in Harlem when the young African American man uses the n-word to address Luke. Criticizing the fact that Cornell's employee uses the n-word "across the street from a building named after one of our greatest heroes" ("Code" 1:03-1:04), Luke highlights the fact that Attucks, who was the first person killed in the Boston Massacre of 1770, played an important part in America's struggle against British domination. However, in many representations of the event from this period, "the complete absence of the black patriot Crispus Attucks" is conspicuous, and can be seen as "an evident example of excluding the African American participation in an important historical event from the American national and cultural memory" (Fitz 464). On the one hand, *Luke Cage* thus, once again, addresses the marginalization of Black Americans in Western historiography. On the other hand, the show simultaneously points to the connection between this erasure and the history of Black enslavement, which cannot be separated from any present-day discussion regarding the n-word.⁷ The scene presents Harlem as both a space of Black empowerment and a space for political disagreement and diversification among the Black community.

⁷ As Jacquelyn Rahman points out, "roots of present-day uses of the term in the African American community lie in the counterlanguage, where the term served as a symbol representing the most salient aspect of slaves' identity" (148). In the Black community today, the n-word is thus frequently used as a form of re-appropriation that furthers Black self-emancipation. However, according to Rahman, African Americans who reject the use of the n-word within their own community are "concerned that its use is symptomatic of an internalization of white racism, [...] as contributing to the construction of an identity founded on self-hate" (141).

I argue that it is primarily the show's setting that renders the interconnectedness of historical and contemporary struggles for equality and recognition visible.⁸ In contrast to the use of New York spaces in the aforementioned post-9/11 comic books, in *Luke Cage*, the urban space of New York is employed to counter the whitewashing of superhero representations following September 11, 2001. The urban space of Harlem in the show functions as a reminder that propagating the image of nationalism (and heroism) as white is an exclusionary, racist, discursive strategy. Rather implicitly here, the show thus engages with its post-9/11 subtext, which is less related to the event itself, but rather to the narratives and representational strategies that have since become inextricably linked to the space of New York.

Luke's Black Male Body as a Postpost-9/11 Space

Apart from the show's setting, *Luke Cage* also uses the body of his eponymous superhero as a space in which these discourses can be negotiated. Luke is bulletproof due to forced experiments conducted on him while he was falsely imprisoned for a murder he did not commit. This storyline is, of course, a reference to state violence afflicted on and the mass incarceration of young Black men in the United States.⁹ Although Luke was a policeman himself before his wrongful conviction, his case demonstrates the ways in which state violence and incarceration can initiate a social downward spiral. In Luke's case, prison guards forced Luke to agree to experiments conducted on his body by threatening to hurt one of his friends. Luke is, thus, subjected to state violence that transforms his skin into a shield protecting his racialized body against the very same forces that created it in the first place. Posing the question whether bulletproof skin would be the only conceivable shield against fatal police shootings of African American men in the United States today, Luke's body serves as a battleground for a variety of discourses related to the Black Lives Matter Movement and racial profiling.

⁸ Moreover, as Nathan Irvin Huggins convincingly criticizes, the marginalization of racialized experiences in the creation of a national history "teleologically bound" to the idea of progress, democracy, and exceptionalism creates the impression that "American history – its institutions, its values, its people – was one thing and racial slavery and oppression were a different story" (xii).

⁹ With unequal sentencing for similar charges and imprisonment rates of African Americans five times as high as those of white people (NAACP), disenfranchisement through mass incarceration has long since become a pressing racial and social issue in the United States.

The show deviates from Luke's costumes in the comic books and, instead, chooses to dress him in a black hoodie — a significant and politically motivated decision, as I will demonstrate. Being frequently shot at by both the police as well as a number of criminals, Luke is forced to replace his clothes frequently. In episode 12 of season 1, Luke receives one of these hoodies from Wu Tang Clan MC Clifford Smith, better known as Method Man, after saving him from a robbery in a small Harlem corner store. As Luke and Method Man recognize each other, Luke mentions that "'P.L.O. Style' was my joint back in the day" ("Soliloquy" 18:43-18:46). Two particulars stand out here. Where one of the robbers vaguely associates Method Man with his arguably more famous group ("I grew up on that Wu-Tang shit" (17:52-17:54)), Luke's comment is revealing as it points to another meaningful intertext of the TV serial. "P.L.O. Style" first appeared on Method Man's solo debut, *Tical* (1994), so he foregrounds his — and the show's — intimate knowledge of Black East-coast, and specifically New York-based, rap and hip-hop culture. As with its other nods to Harlem's history, *Luke Cage* points to the historical complexities and idiosyncrasies of Black American culture. By including this song, the show addresses the potential of hip hop music as a medium to express social concerns. "P.L.O. Style," however, is not just any song in Method Man's vast back catalogue, but, rather, his most obvious link between the political struggles of African Americans and Arabs, here the Palestinian Liberation Organization (P.L.O.). When asked in an interview in 2015 about his motivation for writing this song, Method Man replied that he perceived the P.L.O. as "freedom fighters" who he could identify with because "we felt like we was fighting for our freedom every day, too, and we live that" ("Method Man" 00:35-00:38). While the two struggles for freedom described here can certainly not be equated due to the cultural, political, and historical specificities of their respective contexts, this intertextual reference nevertheless creates an explicit link between Black American and Arab experiences of marginalization and the struggles to overcome them.

Following the encounter between Luke and Method Man, in an attempt to help Luke, the corner store owner distributes perforated black hoodies to the people of Harlem to deflect the police officers looking for Luke, who is falsely accused of murder again. The scene is cinematically interesting due to the cross-cutting between the people moving around the neighborhood of Harlem being mistaken for Luke by the police, and a scene in a radio studio in which Method Man raps about the importance of having a Black hero for Harlem. In the

song, entitled “Bulletproof Love,” Method Man explicitly criticizes the fact that a white male superhero like Iron Man will not “come and save us all” (“Soliloquy” 29:50-29:51) — and thus implicitly criticizes the lack of superheroes in the MCU that do not fit this discriminatory norm. He also places the character of Luke in a lineage of eminent symbolic figures in Black emancipatory movements such as the Black Power movement and the Black Lives Matter movement by singing that they — an unnamed entity most likely denoting representatives of America’s white supremacist system —

already took Malcolm and Martin, this is the last one.
I beg your pardon, somebody pulling a fast one.
Now we got a hero for hire¹⁰ and he a black one.
And bullet-hole hoodies is the fashion.
We in Harlem’s Paradise, tell the Captain
That I’m about to trade the mic for a Magnum
Give up my life for Trayvon to have one. (“Soliloquy” 30:00-30:16)

The black hoodie has become one of the symbols of the Black Lives Matter movement after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot by George Zimmerman, a white man,¹¹ in 2012 while walking back to his stepmother’s house in a primarily white neighborhood. Zimmerman was a member of the ‘Neighborhood Watch’ who called 911 after spotting the young man and ignored the 911 dispatcher’s advice not to pursue Martin. Zimmerman was later acquitted in court after justifying his act by arguing that he had felt threatened by the hoodie on a Black man (Trayvon), whom he had allegedly thought to be either intoxicated or a criminal. The virtual legitimization of this notion through the jury’s verdict semiotically codes the black hoodie as ‘criminal’ when associated with a Black male body. As Mimi Thi Nguyen argues, “the figuration of the hoodie as an animate thing demonstrates some of the operations of power that deem some bodies criminally other — because they are black, and therefore threatening — and available to state violence” (793). These lethal and fictional associations of hoodies worn by people read as Black with criminality are, of course, the result of the centuries-old conflation of Blackness and criminality in the United States, which is intimately

¹⁰ ‘Heroes for Hire’ is of course also a reference of comic book fan Method Man to the eponymous Marvel superhero team that first appeared in *Power Man and the Iron Fist* vol. 54 (1978), and that later received its own eponymous comic book in 1997. Luke Cage (a.k.a. Power Man) was a founding member of this team.

¹¹The issue of Zimmerman’s perceived racialized identity is complex and ambiguous. While he self-identifies as Hispanic, the television news network CNN referred to him as “white Hispanic” (Planas), and his alleged (Afro-)Peruvian and German American descent further complicate the debate. For further reference, see Hing, Francescani, or Planas.

tied to the history of slavery and Jim Crow and which has been used to legitimize racialized (state) violence.

By using the hoodie as a protection against such racially motivated violence, *Luke Cage* reverses the dynamics related to this specific piece of clothing as a symbolic act of protest not only against the murder of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of the murder charges but also as an act of resistance against all forms of racially motivated violence and discrimination. The hoodie is transformed from a sign of alleged criminality into a symbol of Black empowerment that is used subversively by Black subjects in the city space of Harlem. Positioning itself against profiling that is based on essentialist assumptions about race as well as clothing, the show also points to the perils of internalized racism and respectability politics. *Luke Cage* beats the oppressive system at its own game by using two essentialist characteristics that render him a “visible subject” (Naber 2) — his Blackness and the hoodie — to make him invisible for the police. It is also noteworthy that it is only possible for Diamondback to frame Luke in the first place due to the police’s apparent inability to distinguish between different Black men wearing a black hoodie, as Diamondback dresses up in Luke’s preferred outfit when beating a police officer and shouting “I’m Luke Cage” (“Take” 10:30-10:31). The villain seems to be well aware of this dynamic and uses it to his own advantage — much like the people of Harlem use the hoodie for Luke’s protection later. By playing with the contrast between the presumed epitome of Luke’s identity — the simplified idea that he is allegedly nothing but a Black man in a hoodie — and the actual Luke — a complex and individual character — the show points to the fact that the social construction of race, and profiling based on this construction, always operate on the grounds of racial stereotyping. It is striking that, because the simplified image of Luke is so hypervisible to the police in the public sphere due to the performance of the people of Harlem, the actual character Luke is able to hide and remain invisible.¹² Hence, *Luke Cage* oscillates between invisibility and hypervisibility of racialized bodies in the eyes of state power, paralleling and simultaneously subverting the development that Arab and Muslim Americans have faced since 9/11, as outlined by Naber and the other contributors in Amaney A. Jamal and Naber’s edited collection. While the show, on the level of content, addresses the problem of racism

¹² Luke’s strategic invisibility bears resemblance to the unnamed narrator’s disguises towards the end of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, at the very least because both negotiate the epistemology of race in relation to public spaces and institutionalized racism.

primarily against the Black community, I would argue that the Black body of its protagonist also serves as a space to highlight other processes of marginalization that would otherwise have remained unseen.

Conclusion

Situated in the MCU, *Luke Cage* cannot be separated from the transmedial universe's fictionalized version of 9/11, the 'Battle of New York.' By linking the social justice issues addressed in the series explicitly to the city space of New York, and thus also to September 11 and the War on Terror, the show simultaneously creates an explicit link between the longstanding histories of racism in the United States and the allegedly singular event of September 11, 2001. It draws attention to the fact that these issues are also part of post-9/11 New York although they are mostly excluded from post-9/11 media representations — and from many post-9/11 TV series — which focus almost exclusively on the political dimension of the War on Terror and the seemingly imminent threat of terrorism.

Hence, beyond *Luke Cage*'s function as a powerful critique of the racist practices that African Americans still face in the United States today, in its postpost-9/11 mode, the show also has the potential to expose structures of racism whose impact on racialized bodies far exceeds the limits of the Black community. While it is not my intention to diminish the specificity of individual racialized experiences or to equate Black American and Arab and Muslim American experiences, I have nevertheless argued that, through its spatial practices, *Luke Cage* dismantles the illusion of racial profiling as a mere response to September 11, 2001 and, thereby, challenges one of the foundational assumptions of the War on Terror discourse. As such, analyzing the show through the lens of postpost-9/11 television provides a productive additional perspective on both the show itself as well as on current pressing issues in the United States and beyond. With a view to the nation's racialized history, *Luke Cage* does its utmost to question the singularity of political and cultural responses to September 11, 2001. It reveals that these responses are a manifestation of institutional and structural racism that existed in the United States for centuries and, therefore, also moves away from the notion of the event as a watershed moment in U.S. history. All in all, it goes beyond questioning the moral legitimacy of racial profiling targeting Arabs and Muslim Americans and, unlike even the most critical post-9/11 texts, avoids reproducing the

foundational assumptions of the discourse it criticizes. In contrast, the show has the potential to shed light on the discursive strategies used by white supremacists and self-proclaimed patriots to justify perpetual racism under the guise of protecting the nation. Instead of weighing security against liberty, or reasoning against the effectiveness of harassing people based on their outward appearance and religious beliefs, *Luke Cage* takes a different route. The show argues that September 11, 2001 merely provided the occasion, or legitimation, for the continuation of deeply flawed police practices that are rooted in a deeper institutional and structural racism than dominant post-9/11 narratives allege.

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