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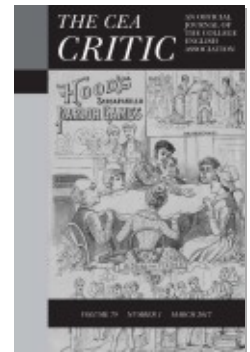
“Be Real Black For Me”: Lincoln Clay and Luke Cage as
the Heroes We Need

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“Be Real Black For Me: Lincoln Clay and Luke Cage as the Heroes We Need”

The beginning of the twenty-first century has seen race and race relations in the United States of America return to days of Freedom Riders, Jim Crow laws, and (figurative if not literal) cross burnings in the night. In 2016 we saw a response to these things come out of the pop culture genre. While one of these responses is specifically a game, *Mafia III*, the other comes to us from the Marvel comic universe via *Luke Cage*. I argue that while the super-/anti-heroes depicted in these narratives (Lincoln Clay and Luke Cage respectively) may not be the heroes that we are accustomed to seeing in video games or comics (they are Black, brash, and fighting for a community of people of color), they are the heroes that we need at this moment. Clay and Cage offer consumers of the media the opportunity to view Blackness critically through the lens of their bodies, their connections to the community, their families, and the women around them. Used as a foil for the men in these narratives, the women come to the fore and are seen in relief.

Music is central in the narratives of these two men. In *Mafia III*, music builds the environment, and the radio plays constantly in the cars that Lincoln Clay drives. Every episode of *Luke Cage* is named after a contemporary rap song, and the music serves as an auditory backdrop for all of his interactions (both violent and not). Because of the centrality of the music in these narratives, each of the sections of my analysis also calls upon its own song, and I start each with a snippet of the lyrics.

You know how much I need you
To have you, really feel you
You don't have to change a thing
No one knows the love you bring
Be real black for me

— “Be Real Black For Me,” performed by
Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway, 1972

Be Real Black for Me.

2016 brought us the release of two of the Blackest protagonists pop culture has ever seen, Marvel's *Luke Cage* and *Mafia III*'s Lincoln Clay, and they are the heroes we need right now. *Unapologetically Black*. Protagonists so cul-

turally Black that their existence is more deeply embedded in Black culture than the pop culture canon.

Luke Cage is more about tributes to Trayvon Martin, Harlem, 90s hip hop culture, the rise of the crack game, and cold cans of Colt 45 on hot days than the Marvel universe. References to "The Incident" are secondary. Cage's struggles don't feel like the struggles of superhero, but more specifically the struggles of a *Black* superhero. One who fights to protect the people of his community and abhors the use of the word nigga/nigger even under the guise of re-appropriation. Luke Cage is a hero that fights because of his Blackness, not in spite of it. He fights to preserve Black culture in the form of corner barbershops as safe havens, neighborhood small business owners, Black churches, and the souls of Black folks in general.

While *Luke Cage* can arguably serve as a critical look at Blackness in the age of Black Lives Matter and extreme police violence (signature black hoodie and all), *Mafia III* offers us some insight into America's history of racism and the rampant destruction of Black bodies, by focusing on life in the American South in 1968. With *Mafia III*'s Lincoln Clay, we find ourselves shifting from Luke Cage, framed law-enforcement officer and scientific-test-subject-turned-superhero, to abandoned, ex-street hustler turned military hero, turned mobster vigilante (and anti-hero). For both Cage and Clay (who ironically both bear the initials L. C.), their paths are chosen for them, and they are led there by forces greater than themselves. Cage's catalyst is the death of a noble father figure named Pops who turned his own life around to become a positive force in the community. Clay is spurred on by the murder of the family that took him in after he was abandoned and placed in an orphanage as a young child. In the case of both men, it boils down to the notion of "Family First," which is a phrase that we hear multiple times during the first season of *Luke Cage*. For these men, it is the avenging of family and the values that they embody that makes them heroic in some way.

In the case of Luke Cage, his heroism is clear: he is fighting murderous, gun-running criminals. But it is not so clear in the case of Clay: he is, for all intents and purposes, a criminal himself, and not the framed or mistaken criminal that we see in Cage, but an actual active member of a mob family bent on revenge. He is more of an accidental hero—the kind of hero who is willing to break any and every law on the books to serve his needs and the needs of the Black people of New Bordeaux. And perhaps this willingness to ignore the law is what makes him another vision of the type hero that we need in this moment.

In his 1968 essay "Ralph Ellison and the Birth of the Anti-Hero," William J. Schafer writes of the creation of the Black anti-hero in the novel *Invisible Man*,

The novel repeats the essential Negro experience in several ways; the overall four-part pattern might be read (albeit overly allegori-

cally) as “emancipation,” “industrialization,” “organization,” and “disintegration”; or the pattern may portray the violent urbanization of a rural Negro consciousness; but the linking of the general Negro experience with an individual viewpoint and voice is accompanied through the repetition of the invisible man’s failure and his cumulative descent into despair ... Every effect in the novel is aimed at showing the inside of the nameless invisible man; we are well below the skin level, and Ellison does not attempt to explain the Negro’s experiences or to blame society for them but to show how he is affected, what the view is from the inside the prison of blackness and invisibility. (83-4)

The patterns of the Black experience that we see in *Luke Cage* and *Mafia III*’s narratives are strikingly similar. At the point that the narratives arc for these men, we see them rebuilding, reclaiming, and being revived after they have lost all they have to lose, their families, and through them, their selves. Through these losses, we are able to see into the hero and view their weakness, not their physical weakness, but the weakness that is left by a lifetime of systemic racism. In that space we see the rape of slave women, the sale of their progeny, the rise of the Klan and Jim Crow Laws, the Civil Rights struggle, the effect of heroin and crack on the Black community, the meteoric rise (and subsequent fall) of hip-hop kings and queens ... and beautiful Black children, men, and women dying in the streets at the hands of racist law enforcement. And it is also in that space that we see that we (the viewers and players) have also come to our lowest of points and that there is one direction that we can go at this point (but that there may be more than one way to propel us “Always Forward”).

For all of these reasons and so many more, Luke Cage and Lincoln Clay are the heroes that we need at this moment: heroes steeped in a violent history that includes rape, abandonment, scientific experimentation, and murder. Heroes who have been tried by fire and who have come out on the other side not only whole, but better than. Made something greater by surviving all of the atrocities that a racist world has heaped upon them. They have survived the unsurvivable and have come back bigger, Blacker, and more powerful than ever.

Ultimately Luke Cage and Lincoln Clay remind us of what Roberta Flack and Donna Hathaway taught us forty-four years ago ... that *Black is Beautiful*.

One child grows up to be
Somebody that just loves to learn
And another child grows up to be
Somebody you’d just love to burn

—“Family Affair,” performed by Sly
and the Family Stone, 1971

Family.

It's a big deal for me. I live and die for mine. I am a fierce protector, not only of my child and extended family, but also of the family that I have built around me. If you make it into that circle, it means something. It means a lot. For this reason only the line "Family first," even in the mouths of the villains in *Luke Cage* resonates, but ultimately any breach of that vow makes them even more monstrous.

Focusing on families and what our heroes in *Mafia III* and *Luke Cage* are willing to do for those families (biological and adopted) reveals a lot about the character of the men. Both Lincoln and Luke are men who have been alone in the world. Lincoln was abandoned as a child and placed in an orphanage and was finally taken in by Sammy Robinson, the leader of the Black mob and owner of Sammy's Club, after the orphanage closed its doors. Luke has no biological familial relationships, or so we think, until he marries prison shrink Reva Connors, after his attempted murder and subsequent escape from prison. The television series begins with him hibernating and healing (or laying in the cut) at Pop's barber shop (who was kind of surrogate uncle to Connors) in the vein of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (which makes its own cameo appearance in the very first episode).

These spaces become home to these men. Sammy's Club and Pop's Barbershop not only bear the names of the father figures that own and run them, but are the spaces in which Lincoln and Luke come into their own as (anti)heroes. Sammy's is the place where Lincoln grows from the son who receives direction and goes out into New Bordeaux to deal with the problems that his father finds himself facing. (And it is this problem solving that ultimately leads to the catalytic act that brings him into his own). After the murder of his family, Lincoln is driven not by revenge (or at least not solely), but rather by ambition. He wants to take control of the criminal enterprises within all of New Bordeaux. His goal is rebuild Sammy's dynasty as something bigger and better and with the help of a series of now underbosses who have been slighted by the previous bosses and are now willing to come together to serve under Lincoln Clay, who promises to be not only more fair, but more socially aware than his predecessors.

For Luke, only after the murder of Pop is Luke driven to move "always forward" specifically to avenge the death of Pop and to maintain the barbershop as "Switzerland," a neutral place where folks can come together to solve problems peacefully. It is only when an outlier (because even villain Cornell/Cottonmouth mourns the death of Pop because of their connection as children/young men) who does not acknowledge the neutrality of this safe zone that the entire structure of the world begins to disintegrate. And it becomes the job of Luke Cage to step up as the heir to the throne and restore order to chaos with the help of Bobby Fish, shop-regular and chess-guru who steps in to run the barbershop day to day so that kids in

the neighborhood have somewhere to go to avoid life on the streets. It is the socially responsible thing to do.

Social responsibility is a notion that runs as an undercurrent in both narratives. *Luke Cage* shows that there is honor among thieves and that even dirty money should be used to rebuild Harlem for the people. Harlem is Black Mariah's legacy just as New Bordeaux is Lincoln Clay's. Lincoln is taking the city back from Sal Marcano so that Black women are no longer being strung out, imprisoned, and used as the Confederate underboss's "thoroughbreds," and so that Black women are no longer being used and abused by white men who fetishize them (there is great ambient discussion of this). (The narrative here is so rich when one considers the sexual history and politics of the region of the US that serves as the inspiration for New Bordeaux.) Most importantly Lincoln is taking over as the new boss with the promise to Cassandra that he will do better than Sammy to uplift the community: that he will do more than just toss a couple of boxes of food to the needy when the whim strikes, and that he will provide regular support for the community that ultimately supports them. But even while Lincoln may feel that he is replacing a flawed father figure in Sammy, he has not come to the realization that he is yet another flawed patriarch. While he works to do away with the systemic racism within the crime syndicate in New Bordeaux and to restore cultural connections, he does not seem to be cognizant of the effect that his own criminal industry has on the community. There is no real recognition of the effect that even socially aware criminal endeavors have on the community at large. His power is growing, but it is myopic.

"Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying. When you have it, you know it."

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Women.

While they may be intended to be used as foils for the (anti)heroes, the women in *Mafia III* and *Luke Cage* are most fascinating. These women are simultaneously complex and maddeningly shallow. I say this to mean there are centuries of tears, laughter, abuse, and love tied up in each and every one of them, but at the same time all of this history and all of these emotions all seem to (by design) fall in service to the narratives' main *male* protagonists. This seems especially odd when it is through the women in *Mafia III* that we learn much about the cultural and racialized history of the American South, that we get much of the background for the struggle that 2K Games is struggling to so accurately portray.

Through the women of New Bordeaux, who are being forced to sell their bodies, we get a glimpse into the history of women of the African

Diaspora as bedwarmers, breeding stock, domestics, and so much more. And while it is their stories and their oppression that drives the action of the game in some very interesting ways, these stories are never their own to tell because they are without Voice. We hear the tales of their sexual servitude in the crude and graphic tales told between confederate flag wearing racists, in “dirty” things whispered by johns in alleys, and in the outspoken voices of Black men who are calling for change on the backs of the women who we see (metaphorically at least) always on their backs. The ambience in this game is powerful, and as with the slave narratives that told the stories of these women’s ancestors, the horror of their treatment is meant to play upon the gamer’s sympathies and make the horrors of their enslavement/prostitution more abhorrent. It was the sexual exploitation of women like Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent) in *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and the fact that familial connections were weakened to the point of virtual non-existence by the sexual and sexualized treatment of slave women (Smith Foster 104–5; Morgan 85).

In *Mafia III* and *Luke Cage*, I am reminded constantly and almost violently of Nina Simone’s song “Four Women,” a song that calls to mind the myriad struggles of Black women of all ilks from the antebellum period forward. In what follows I will look at how the tropes of Simone’s four women map on to female characters (and groups of characters) in *Mafia III* and *Luke Cage*. As I write this essay, I must also disclose that I have not yet finished the main campaign of the game because I find myself constantly exploring new areas and new experiences and just doing things like driving around and listening to radio personalities and callers talk about the racial, political, and social conditions in New Bordeaux. These are rich experiences that I don’t want to let go of. These and the music ... but that topic warrants an article all its own.

My skin is black
 My arms are long
 My hair is woolly
 My back is strong
 Strong enough to take the pain
 inflicted again and again
 What do they call me

My name is AUNT SARAH
 My name is Aunt Sarah

—Nina Simone, “Four Women,” 1966

In *Luke Cage*, Mariah (the cousin of Cornell/Cottonmouth) is as strong as she is damaged, a woman who is dark of skin (and reflective of the colorism that comes along with it) and fierce of spirit. We see in Mariah a woman who wants to create *her* Harlem, a Harlem that is restored to the undamaged state that she once knew (ironically a time when she herself was undamaged). We see from flashbacks that Mariah seems to be so

obsessed with the concept of personal strength now because as a child she was not “strong enough” to defend herself from sexual assault at the hands of Uncle Pete. Uncle Pete who accuses her in his last moments of “wanting it.” Uncle Pete who haunts her even in the moments that lead to her becoming Harlem’s new crime boss as she cries out that she “never wanted it” to Pete’s ghost or to what has come to be representative of what he stood for. Mariah is strong: she comes to protect herself even when no else would. (Her own mother chose to send her away rather than cut business ties with Uncle Pete.) She is strong in that as a child herself she becomes a surrogate mother/aunt to her cousin Cornell who has been abandoned at her mother’s door. Her name is Mariah, and she too has been sexually exploited.

My skin is yellow
My hair is long
Between two worlds
I do belong
My father was rich and white
He forced my mother late one night
What do they call me
My name is SAFFRONIA
My name is Saffronia

—Nina Simone, “Four Women,” 1966

Saffronia, the tragic mulatto. Because of the strength of the women who we see characterized in these media, we do not see many women who are tragic in their helplessness, women who do not know their true selves. What we do get is the image of a woman who seems to be torn between two worlds. Torn between a world that allows her to love a convict and one that requires her to be his captor. It is in Reva Connors, the wife of Luke Cage that we see this tragic mulatto. One pulled between the Blackness of the community that raised her and the Whiteness of the penal system that exists to enslave and experiment on those like her (if only she realized that likeness). The depth of this tragedy only becomes apparent after her death.

My skin is tan
My hair is fine
My hips invite you
my mouth like wine
Whose little girl am I?
Anyone who has money to buy
What do they call me
My name is SWEET THING
My name is Sweet Thing

—Nina Simone, “Four Women,” 1966

Sweet things. Thoroughbreds. Beautiful women of the bayou who do not belong to themselves. They belong to the Dixie Mafia. The best of the bunch are kept, placated with heroin, as the thoroughbred prostitutes in Merle

Jackson of the Dixie Mafia's "stable." An operation that is being run, to add insult to injury, out of the club that belonged to Lincoln Clay's now dead father, Sammy, and was named after Sammy's deceased wife, Perla. These women are held captive in Perla's, which now features Confederate flags on the walls, and they are there to serve the racist and sexual fantasies of their all white clientele. Here in Perla's, we see reminiscences of slave women who were sent down to Louisiana for the purposes of being sold at mulatto and octoroon balls. Balls where women were sold specifically into sexual servitude. Where white men with means could indulge in their fantasies of having sex with women of color. We hear this practice of sexual servitude, even in the faceless voices of Black men on the radio as Lincoln Clay drives around on his mission to free the women. We also hear this history in the "locker room talk" between the white men, about what they'd done to these women and what they planned to do in the future, that gets overheard by Lincoln as he stealthily moves in on them. But what's ever apparent (and important) is that Lincoln Clay is killing these men, not for the sake of freeing the women, but rather because breaking up the prostitution ring will ruin the business of the mafia boss, Sal Marcano, (through his underbosses) who has murdered Lincoln's family. Clay is not a willing hero: these women are a means to an end for him and nothing more. They are still commodities, their collective name is Sweet Thing.

My skin is brown
 my manner is tough
 I'll kill the first mother I see
 my life has been too rough
 I'm awfully bitter these days
 because my parents were slaves
 What do they call me
 My name is PEACHES

—Nina Simone, "Four Women," 1966

Lincoln Clay's partner in crime, Cassandra is the revolutionary of my youth. She is Foxy Brown and Coffy rolled into one. She is a woman who seems to have a conscience and who is willing to do something about it. She begins with trying to take over Sammy's business at the beginning of the game, partially because she doesn't see him as being socially responsible enough. He is living too high on the hog while the rest of the Black folks in the Hollow are going hungry and waiting for Sammy to throw them a bone when he determines that the time is right (like in celebration of the return on his son, Lincoln, from the war). Cassandra is willing to do what she must to keep the Black people of the Hollow safe. She chastises Lincoln for not being forward thinking enough to realize that the war that he has started will extend past himself. She questions him on what he thinks will happen to the rest of them when he is not around, if he does not help get them the weapons that they are going to need to protect themselves.

Cassandra's critique shows the player how deeply flawed Lincoln is as a character, because once again he is willing to allow Cassandra's crew to put their lives in jeopardy to take over Marcano family businesses, but will not sufficiently outfit them past that because he is not interested in starting a "revolution." But it's this revolution that Cassandra had been seeking from the very beginning. One being waged not only against Sammy's rule over the Hollow, but also against the white men of the Dixie Mafia (and those who supported them) who were taken with kidnapping Black folks, hunting them like escaped slaves for sport, and murdering them in most vicious ways. Cassandra's war is one that is being waged against racism, classism, and colorism in the community. Her Haitian heritage makes her more fearsome because of the irrational fear that the white people in the game seem to have of Voodoo, considering the fact that the game takes place in a region where the practice and the belief are practically the norm. Her political and social objectives seem to be diametrically opposed to those of Lincoln's, and so we realize even from the moment that he seeks out her help in his cause that things will not end well, she claims only to want to act in service to Lincoln for as long as she has to in order to secure her next big vantage point.

Overall, the mental and narrative strength of the women in *Mafia III* and *Luke Cage* seems to be such that without their presence the story would fall apart. Ironically, I don't know if the same could be said of the male characters in the media. Of course they would not be the same stories, but they could be equally fascinating.

While thus far I have looked at the ways that themes like the sexualization of women, family, and the characterization of men as heroes in *Mafia III* and *Luke Cage*, I would like to interrogate the notion of freedom and the ways that freedom gets enacted or enacted upon in the narrative we play. While I have previously used songs that were contemporary to the narrative of Lincoln Clay and *Mafia III* as a frame, for the purposes of this final section I want to shift gears and use a song that would be contemporary with *Luke Cage*, Beyoncé's "Freedom" (2016).

Freedom! Freedom! I can't move
 Freedom, cut me loose!
 Freedom! Freedom! Where are you?
 Cause I need freedom too!
 I break chains all by myself
 Won't let my freedom rot in hell
 Hey! I'ma keep running
 Cause a winner don't quit on themselves

—Beyoncé Knowles and Kendrick Lamar, "Freedom," 2016

Freedom.

The concept of freedom with and for Luke Cage and Lincoln Clay is a fascinating one, because regardless of whether or not you view one as a hero and one as an anti-hero the most interesting fact, to me, about the two is that both men are freed by the very acts that were meant to destroy them. Luke Cage's attempted murder at the hands of a prison guard gives him the super strength that he needs to free himself from prison and the opportunity to begin anew when everyone assumes that he has died in the fiery blast. Lincoln Clay also found his freedom (and his invisibility) after being shot in the head and left to die in a burning building.

Fire.

Fire that consumes, fire that *renews*, fire that leads to a *resurrection*. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Cage and Clay find themselves at the same point of the beginning of their narratives as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* finds himself at the end of his, with the same realization: "I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (581).

Luke Cage can no longer hide from the truth of his incarceration and his participation in it. Lincoln Clay can no longer hide from the truth of the racism that exists in the mafia "family" around him, even while he participates in it. Clay can also no longer hide from the truth of the racism in the country that he has fought and killed for. The fact that he dons his old Army BDU (Battle Dress Uniform) jacket and gives himself a regulation haircut is not lost on me. He is once again ready for war, but this time the enemy is different. It is America in the guise of Jim Crow laws, racial epithets thrown about on the street, the assassination of Civil Rights leaders, and the sexual subjugation of Black bodies.

But the irony, in the cases of both *Luke Cage* and *Mafia III*, lies in the fact that this rebirth, this realization stems from acts meant to destroy. And in that destruction they are free.

I'ma wade, I'ma wave through the waters
 Tell the tide, "Don't move"
 I'ma riot, I'ma riot through your borders
 Call me bulletproof
 Lord forgive me, I've been runnin'
 Runnin' blind in truth
 I'ma wade, I'ma wave through your shallow love
 Tell the deep I'm new.

—Beyoncé Knowles and Kendrick Lamar, "Freedom," 2016

Bulletproof. Magical Negros.

Lincoln Clay, the man who survives being shot point blank in the head. The man who causes his would-be assassin to be admonished for only shooting him *once*. Clay himself says to another that the head is the worst place to shoot him because of the hardness of the skull. He is the epitome of a hardhead. One who does not listen, one who learns things the hard way. But he has learned, and he can no longer run from the truth of racism of the South, of white men pitting people of color against one another in order to do their dirty work.

Luke Cage is a man who is literally bulletproof. A man who can not be pierced by the bullets of men, but clad in a symbolic black hoodie like Trayvon Martin, the boy who was killed by the gunfire of a racist who was never found guilty of the murder of an innocent boy. Cage walks the streets wearing bullet-ridden hoodies like a badge of honor, and when the point comes that he can not for his own safety, that mantle is taken up by other Black men on the streets of Harlem, not only in solidarity, but to help Cage maintain his own invisibility as he moves to “riot” through the necessary borders.

But mama, don't cry for me, ride for me
 Try for me, live for me
 Breathe for me, sing for me
 Honestly guidin' me
 I could be more than I gotta be
 Stole from me, lied to me, nation hypocrisy
 Code on me, drive on me
 Wicked, my spirit inspired me

—Beyoncé Knowles and Kendrick Lamar, “Freedom,” 2016

Justice.

The lives of murdered love ones call for justice. They call for celebration. The voices of those who have passed call for us to continue to live when they cannot. For Lincoln, it is the voices of his father, brother, and friend that call to him. It is for Sammy, Ellis, and Danny that he fights. For them that he commits his atrocities. And again his donning of the BDU jacket as he engages in that fight connects, not only to the notion of a war being fought on the streets, but to a notion of nationalism. Lincoln has spent years fighting in Vietnam, Special Forces no less, only to find that his sacrifice has not elevated him in the eyes of a white supremacist nation. Only to find that his service and patriotism was a lie. He is still not welcome in the restaurants and bars that bear signs that say “No Coloreds Allowed,” his is still a “nigger,” a “jig,” and a “boy,” despite having proven that he is a man. That realization and the history of the people of New Bordeaux is what drives him.

It is what drives me as a player. Seeing the connection between the news stories on the radio and gleaned from stories being shared between NPCs (Non-Playable Characters) on the street as I walk by and what is going on in the world around us at this moment drives me not only to play the game and pay attention to the stories, but to think about what it all means. What does it mean that a white man is able to gun down two young Black men who come to ask for help after having their car break down only to go initially uncharged and ultimately supported by the in-game community and be forced to compare that to Renisha McBride who was gunned down on the porch of a Dearborn Heights, MI home that she went to seek help in 2013? Or Jonathan Ferrell who was shot by police twelve times while seeking help in a residential neighborhood in North Carolina after crashing his car? How do we ignore the in-game stories of police brutality and vigilante justice against young Black men when almost fifty years later (and in the real world) we are still watching as young Black men and women are being murdered on the streets of America by police officers who are rarely charged and never convicted?

How do we not see the connections between police brutality in New Bordeaux, *Luke Cage's* Harlem, and 2016 America? How do we ignore this especially in light of the fact that Americans have just elected a president who is supported by the same KKK that Lincoln Clay fights, that *Mafia III's* brothers of the Southern Union feel far too familiar, and that while we may have previously been able to see glimpses of progress between a fictionalized narrative and our own people are now being forced to recognize that we still live very much in the mentality of 1968 America. An America where people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and immigrants are still seen as lesser, and women are still seen as commodities who are there to be sexually exploited by any white man of means. In this America, all women are thoroughbreds, all POC are niggers/spics/boys, and some immigrants still need to be locked behind a wall.

Here I have made the argument that *Mafia III* (while not a mechanically perfect game) and *Luke Cage* are vitally important as social commentary because of what they have to offer, if we listen, engage, and think. Both texts give us the opportunity to consider how far we have (and have not) come in terms of racial and gender equality in the United States. By examining these two texts together, we are able to reflect on the analogues in the antebellum and Civil Rights eras in the American South (as evidenced by the connections drawn between the sexual exploitation of slave women and the women held in sexual servitude to the Dixie Mafia in *Mafia III*). We are also able to interrogate the parallels between police brutality and seemingly *small* inequities like differing police response times in neighborhoods based on their racial demographics in *Mafia III* and *Luke Cage*, this calls us to consider carefully not only the practice of policing Black bodies but also the racist implications of that practice. Putting *Mafia III* and *Luke*

Cage into conversation with each another and interrogating them as cultural artifacts tells us a lot about the trajectory of civil and racial equality (or lack thereof) in the United States and offers us some real insight into why we need heroes who are unapologetically Black. Heroes who know the history of the oppression that has been faced by those who are racially and culturally like them and are unafraid to engage with that history and all that comes along with it (racism, misogyny, and respectability politics) all in service to the struggle to survive. While characters like Lincoln Clay and Luke Cage may not be the heroes that we all want, they are the ones that we need in that they offer us insight into a variety of perspectives on Black life and culture.

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