



BLACK
PANTHER

BLACK PANTHER: WHEN THE BLOCKBUSTER GOES POLITICAL.



"THE BLACK PANTHER HAS BEEN A PROTECTOR OF WAKANDA FOR GENERATIONS. AND NOW, IT IS TIME TO SHOW THE OUTSIDE WORLD WHO WE ARE."

T'CHALLA

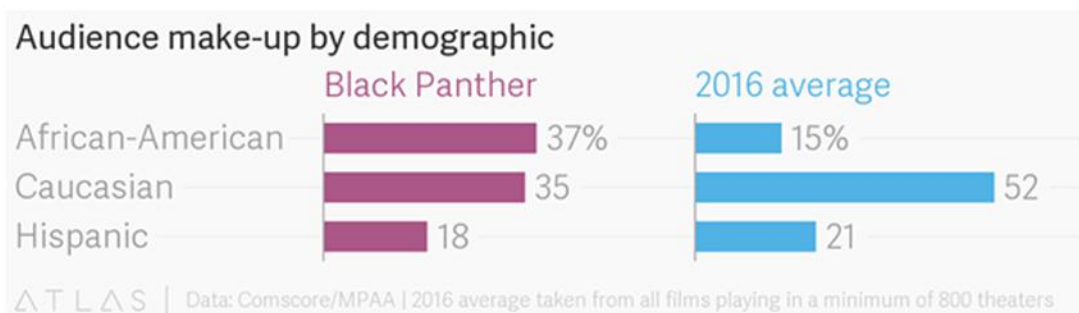
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Black Panther is the latest entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and it made quite an impact ever since its release. The movie is a massive success at the box-office, becoming the 5th film to make \$200 million in the first 3 days of its release. The film is a real revolution when it comes to the MCU and superhero movies, breaking the mold in many ways.



SUN SETTING ON AN OVERWHELMINGLY WHITE SUPERHERO LANDSCAPE.

Black Panther is a cultural hit and has become a huge phenomenon, especially among African-Americans. After a quick glance at the audience, we can see that it attracted more people of color than any other Marvel movie. On opening week-end for *Black Panther*, 37% of all tickets were sold to African-Americans and 35% to Caucasians, which is a substantial change because on average, only 15% of the audience for a superhero movie is African-American while Caucasians represent 50% of the demographic. With a cast mainly composed of black actors and actresses, the movie appeals to a wider audience as more people feel represented. It has received much praise with overwhelmingly positive reviews around the world and is particularly a massive hit in North America and in Africa.



Black Panther is a beacon of hope for black people who, for the majority of cinema history, were underrepresented; the impact of the movie is already visible with countless examples of fans wearing cosplays of characters from the movie, as well as celebrities and athletes using the new "Wakanda Forever" salute. The movie has created a shared sense of pride in black communities and can be used as an example of black excellence, which is a term usually employed when black people achieve something great or inspire through their qualities. In the case of *Black Panther*, the term black excellence was used to show what an achievement the movie is for its positive representation of black people and for the quality of the movie itself.

Thus far, the landscape of superhero movies has been predominantly white and male but Ryan Coogler, the film's director, managed to create complex black characters that can serve as inspiration for young people of color, characters they can relate to and use as role models, something that was mostly lacking before this film. Several campaigns were created before the movie's release through charities such as the #BlackPantherChallenge which aimed to fund movie screenings for kids who may not have been able to see the movie.

It is clearly not an overstatement to say that Marvel has done a great job at handling the hype for *Black Panther* after T'Challa's first appearance in *Captain America: Civil War*, and has delivered a movie meeting the expectations of the public and even more. The movie is clearly not just a regular Marvel movie full of explosions and fighting against evil; it goes much deeper by tackling important social issues and shares a whole new world with the audience. It is unique while still perfectly fitting the MCU.

However, that does not mean people spared it. To some, the movie's uniqueness wasn't that convincing, and more action sequences would have been preferable to cultural struggles. For Ed Power, from the *Irish Independent*, T'Challa should have followed in other Marvel superheroes' footsteps a bit more and confronted his enemies in epic battles.

Ed Power's reaction is not a racist one, but, obviously, a movie set in African culture, with a majority of black actors was bound to receive racist backlash, regardless of how great the movie objectively was; because a cast full of white people with only two or three supporting black characters meant to fill in stereotypical roles seems natural. On the contrary, an all-black cast, in a context of political and racial turmoil in the US isn't. As a consequence, some people had anti-black reactions, trying to drag the movie down or even yelling racial slurs at the audience, such as this intoxicated white woman in Sparta, New Jersey, who got temporarily restricted from a theater after causing a commotion. On Facebook, a group called "Down with Disney's Treatment of Franchises and its Fanboys" had to be taken down after it organized an event called "**Give *Black Panther* a Rotten Audience Score on Rotten Tomatoes**", joined by about 3,700 people whose goal was to sabotage the movie score. In France too, something similar happened, affecting the Google Search engine and the French movie website Allociné:



(French journalist Rokhaya Diallo's reaction to Black Panther being associated to "The Planet of the Apes: Supremacy": "Hello @allocine how do you explain the fact that looking for a cinema leads to your site that references the movie #BlackPanther under the title of "Planet of the Apes: Supremacy"? #racism")

Despite these few incidents and unfortunate manifestations of racism, the movie is a great success overall and it makes a clever attempt at redefining the movie genre. One of the ways *Black Panther* shines is through its writing and its characters. Unlike most superhero movies, the protagonists and the main antagonist feel more complex. For example, T'Challa, played by **Chadwick Boseman**, is not the classic cape-wearing superhero. Coogler even said: *"What's so great about Panther is he's a superhero who, if you grab him and ask him if he's a superhero, he'll tell you, 'No.' He sees himself as a politician, as a leader in his country. It just so happens that the country is a warrior-based nation where the leaders have to be warriors, as well, so sometimes he has to go fight"*. Instead we have a character that distinguishes himself from most superheroes by putting his supernatural abilities in the background of his thought process and making sure that he is the leader of his people before anything else.



Marvel/Disney

When it comes to villains, a majority of "bad guys" have a similar objective; usually it is limited to conquering or destroying the world. Unfortunately, this superhero movie trope has become uninteresting and dull. But when it comes to *Black Panther*, a breath of fresh air made its way into the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Erik Killmonger, the movie's main antagonist, has already become a fan favorite. This is all thanks to **Michael B. Jordan** who delivered a brilliant performance, and to the writing of the character itself. The motives of the character are somehow justifiable and his backstory is intrinsically linked to the story and to the hero, T'Challa, alias the Black Panther. Being able to connect with a villain is usually quite difficult, mostly because their goals are so unrealistic and just evil, people can relate to villains but it is commonly due to their badass attitude. In Killmonger's case, it is the conflicts and the challenges that he is facing throughout the movie which are very much set in reality, that allow people who feel as though they share some of those frustrations and ideas to relate easily to the character. Even though you may not agree with his methods, you can empathize with his mission and his tragic fate.



BLACK PANTHER, BLACK IDENTITY AND BLACK POLITICS.

The complexity of *Black Panther's* villain Killmonger and the tragic dimension of his background story casts very strong light on an omnipresent issue inside real, live African-American communities: the sense of a shattered self and the complex construction of a Black-American identity, or, as director Ryan Coogler himself put it, ***"the issues of being of African descent in the United States of America"***. African slaves had to throw their life and culture off the boat and straight into the depths of the Atlantic during the Middle Passage -the process of transporting slaves across the ocean-, leaving them with nothing but a large existential Void to fill where their identity was.

The issue of the construction of the self is tackled in a very subtle, yet crushingly accurate way. As mentioned earlier, Erik Killmonger N'Jadaka is a complex character, built around an idea of liminality, being born from an American mother and a Wakandan father, he brings a sense of obvious in-betweenness into the movie. Minor villain Ulysses Klaue, right before meeting his demise, exclaims: ***"I thought you were just some crazy American!"***. Besides, Erik Killmonger is acknowledged as ***"(..) not Wakandan, he's one of ours"*** by C.I.A agent Everett K. Ross when he arrives in Wakanda and introduces himself to the rest of the characters and distant family members. This statement creates a gap between him and the Wakandans: he may have Wakandan origins but he remains, to them, an American, a foreigner, an unwelcome guest in a country he had hoped would become his home. To add to this feeling of foreignness, he is showing up dressed up as a member of the United States military, creating a stark contrast with the rest of the Wakandan characters, wearing colorful, traditional African clothing.



Throughout the whole movie, the duality that underlies the question of an African-American identity is represented by Killmonger's multi-layered personality. At times, he appears as an angry orphan seeking revenge for selfish motives against his father's murderer and the Wakanda's monarchy, the black elite that abandoned him and let him grow up alone in poverty in Oakland. He can also become a sort of twisted revolutionist who cares so much about his own folk and feels so much for black people's unfair treatment all around the world that he ends up wanting to solve the situation by resorting to violent means, namely arming black people and making it possible for them to fight for their rights.

This desire for revolution and, in a way, for black supremacy, is actually somewhat reminiscent of Malcolm X's Black Panthers Party belligerent political activism in its later years. As writer **James Baldwin** actually put it in *The Negro in American Culture*, "*To be a negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won't destroy you*", which clearly applies to Killmonger's state of mind, personality and tragic fate.

The parallel between Erik's fictional impediment and his existing African-Americans counterparts' actual situation thus appears in full light: just like *Black Panther's* most scandalous character, they are, in a way, rejected. They are kept at bay by their own people, both spatially and socially, in a white-dominated society in which people of color still struggle to fit in and climb the social ladder. African-Americans still pay the fair price of centuries worth of lingering systemic racism, with their desire to find a place to belong unquenched, hence the relevance of socio-political movements such as Black Lives Matter. In Killmonger's case, just as he had to earn his spot in the American world and society through violent means and fighting, even though he's an American born and raised, he also had to be granted entrance to Wakanda, which he is only because he brings Klaue's dead body with him. He's neither welcome in his own country -the US- nor in his father's -Wakanda-. The path to the homeland is tortuous, and the struggle to get there is real and tragically embodied by Killmonger.



A tweet tackling the issue of double standards when it comes to what is expected of black people vs. what is expected of white people, by @SydPetite

Killmonger reproaching the Wakandan elite with ignoring black people and their troubles in the outside world echoes a certain idea of Pan-Africanism. It is the claim that black people, no matter who they are or where they come from, are, in a way, linked to one another by the same ethnic identity; they are part of the same huge "family" and bear the responsibility of helping each other and providing what support they can in the face of oppression. Following this idea, being black connects African Americans to a worldwide community composed by the Africans but also by black people in the diaspora, such as Black Carribeans and Black Latinos, looking much beyond obvious differences in language and culture and focusing on their ethnicity and common experience of colonization and shapeshifting racism they all have to endure. For all these reasons, Killmonger brings up the question of Wakanda's responsibility in helping Black people at a global scale, deeming the question of ethnicity more important than that of national community. According to him, ***"Two billion people all over the world look like us and their lives are much harder"*** and Wakanda's duty is to help.

Wakandans are, indeed, very nationalistic people, always putting their own people and their country above anyone and anything else, even above their personal relationships, as is demonstrated by Okoye who almost kills her lover during the final battle for Wakanda. Their world view is extremely manichaeian as they believe it to be divided into two different groups: them and the others; Wakandans and foreigners; "Us" and "Them". As a consequence of this very self-centered way of thinking, Wakandans have built walls around their country to prevent anyone from entering, they refuse to take in refugees or offer any help to foreign countries, despite them being immensely rich and technologically advanced. They live in complete isolation. Killmonger, on the contrary, advocates black hegemony, in which oppressed black people overturn their situation to gain the upper hand over the oppressors, in an almost French Revolution-esque course of action, resorting to violence, rebellion, uprising and overthrowing the elite as repayment for centuries of injustice and inequity. Then again, Killmonger's actions are actually not devoid of egotistical motives, and he could also be seen as the archetype of the megalomaniac political leader, resorting to military power to seek influence and assert his superiority over his opponents. T'Challa's character, on the contrary, could be seen as a leader of the rational kind, infused with 'African Wisdom' and the idea that influence should be carried by ideals rather than violence and domination.

The question of the opposition between a national identity, linking individuals to one another through their belonging to the same country and a global community based on ethnicity and racial identity, as well as the aforementioned isolationism versus cosmopolitanism, are not the only ones that are brought up by Killmonger in *Black Panther*. These seemingly binary choices -national identity versus racial identity and isolationism versus cosmopolitanism- are scattered throughout the movie as essential parts of its structure and elements that get increasingly important as the story unfolds. Just as the African-American identity, the *Black Panther* universe is deeply rooted in duality, built on this set of thought-provoking false dichotomies, allowing T'Challa, by opposition to Killmonger's stubborn extremism, to grow and become a better version of himself by pursuing an intermediate solution between two choices that appear too extreme and simplistic, such as complete isolation or political overthrowing through violent means.

All of this reminds of the striking opposition between the Black Panther Party and Martin Luther King's civil rights movement. Even though Black Panther initially appeared in a comic that was published a few months before the creation of the (in)famous Black Panther Party in October 1966, the probability for the character to actually have influenced the name of the activist movement is still to consider. Indeed, the character showcases Marvel's position towards racism: in 1976, in the comic series *Jungle Action*, a short narrative arc of Black Panther's adventures called "Panther vs. The Klan" was released in which Black Panther fights the Ku Klux Klan's fictional leader who wanted to tie him to a burning cross. Nevertheless, the radicality of the Black Panther Party actions forced Marvel to distance themselves from it by changing the character's name to "Black Leopard", as to avoid any false correlation.



(Black Panther making fun of his new 'Black Leopard' name in Avengers #105 (1973))

However, less than a year later, Marvel decided to change his name back to Black Panther. The decision was illustrated in Avengers #105 (1973) in which T'Challa aka Black Panther said: *"I did not want my personal goals and tribal heritage confused with political plans made by others, but in the final analysis, I decided that made as much sense as altering the Scarlet Witch's name (...). I am not a stereotype. I am myself. And I am the Black Panther!"*

The movie, like the comics, decided to put in some hints of political ambiguity while totally avoiding any references to Malcolm X's activist movement. However, it appears quite clearly that, through his actions and remorseless use of extreme methods to protest against black people's condition and to achieve his socio-political goals -which indubitably bend towards black empowerment through revolution and social destabilization of western societies and, ultimately, towards black supremacy-, the character of Killmonger mirrors the methods of a Black Panther Party member. T'Challa, for his part, is the fictional embodiment of Malcolm X's opposite, the civil rights activist Martin Luther King. Contrary to Killmonger, he's calm, kind and ready to look for another solution; he doesn't see violence as a solution, just as Martin Luther King thought of nonviolent activism as the only way out of discrimination. Paradoxically, Killmonger, the Black Panther activist's avatar, is the one whose suit looks the least like a black panther, but rather like an ostentatious version of a black leopard.



Images from Marvel/Disney, edit
by Quentin Duboz

The costumes play an essential role in the movie. The ideologies and personalities of T'Challa and Erik Killmonger are reflected in their choice of suits. T'Challa decides to go with a more discreet variant of the Black Panther suit, prioritizing stealth to go unnoticed, which goes well with Wakanda's mentality of isolationism and their intention of staying hidden from the rest of the world. The color of the suit obviously refers to the animal and we can observe parallels between T'Challa and the black panther, for example at the beginning of the film during the first fight scene we can see the hero take a stance which closely resembles the behavior of the animal when hiding in a tree ready to jump on its prey.



Marvel/Disney

Unlike the hero, when the time has come for Killmonger to choose a suit, he chooses the flashier look. And even though when he makes that decision, he has the power of the Black Panther, the suit is more reminiscent of a leopard, with patterns on the top of his head and with golden colors that are associated with the fur of the animal. The detailing on the mask of Killmonger betrays the aggressiveness of the character as the suit shows the animal's teeth. The choice of the leopard is fitting considering the mindset of the character regarding vibranium. It is said for leopards, that the mother shares its food with its offspring if they are unable to find some on their own, this behavior is similar to Erik's view on the technology of Wakanda. He believes that the weapons produced in Wakanda should be shared with black people around the world who are unable to fend for themselves against their oppressors.



Marvel/Disney

On another note, T'Challa's traditional costumes are elegant, colorful and carefully embroidered. The most important part of each is the jacket: it is the only colored or patterned piece of clothing, contrasting with the rest of the outfit that's only bearing one color, reminding the audience of Wakanda's sovereign temper; he can be both a serious political leader and a cheerful friend or son, depending on the situation he is in. On the other hand, Killmonger's clothing is entirely different: the character's main outfit works both as a reminder of his role in the military through the presence of the bulletproof vest and of his American identity through the modernity and originality that are conveyed by the juxtaposition of a military-like informal outfit with a traditional element -the Igbo mask-. In another one of his outfits, he's wearing his jacket wide open, uncovering the upper part of his body, showing off his military scarifications as a way to assert his power and ascendancy over the other characters while, at the same time, stressing on his marginality and widening the gap between him and the rest of the Wakandan. Besides, Killmonger appears as superficial with his extravagant haircut and American habits of bling, in comparison to T'Challa's humble style. The dichotomy between superficiality and modesty can be transposed to the territories they grew up in: the USA for Killmonger and Wakanda/Africa for T'Challa.

So, costumes do emphasize the strict opposition between T'Challa and Killmonger in temper, location and aims.



As it has already been discussed before, the quest for the Motherland is central to African-American social and cultural problematics. Where is home, then? Where would African-Americans feel like they belong? Africa? An American land devoid of racism?

When facing racism, Black Americans usually get told to “go back to their country”, implying that they should go back to Africa, but the question is immensely more complicated. Forcing black people into slavery also meant brutally severed ties with their home country, culture, traditions and, above all, families and history. They became America's Lost Children. They were orphans of history, had no more links to their ancestors, no connection to the land they were brought upon, and were thus thrown into an unending quest for identity. With the passing of time, entire families got lost in the Void, a concept that encapsulates Black people's desperation over the loss of their ancestry. The issue very much interested Alexander Murray Palmer Haley, usually shortened as Alex Haley, in his novel *Roots*. He tried to trace his family history back to its beginning in Africa and even traveled to Gambia, looking for his long lost past. The same interest taken in the pursuit of their genealogy still draws millions of Black African-Americans to the African continent.

This constant state of in-betweenness and living in the wrong part of the world is well portrayed by Erik Killmonger, who has no mother and no family. His father gets killed and he ends up living alone with nothing but his lucent Wakandan tattoo on the inside of his lower lip and a promise made by his late father that, someday, he would be able to go and contemplate a Wakandan sunset, *“the most beautiful thing in the world”*. During the vision happening after ingesting the Heart-Shaped sacred Herb, T'Challa gets to see all of his ancestors, some in the form of black panthers, some humans, like his father, grandfather and great grandfather. In contrast, the only person that is present inside Killmonger's version of this scene is his father.

Black Panther, because it tackles such a wide range of inherently black social issues and draws so much from African culture -both from the African continent and the diaspora- is a celebration of blackness, providing the spectator with a large panorama of costumes and other dressing gowns, acts as a reminder of black excellence and examples of Africa's cultural richness and diversity. Because black countries are more than just Trump's "shithole countries".

For example, cultural elements as distinct as Ethiopian Surma and Mursi's lip plates, Zulu headdresses or the Massai costumes worn by the fierce Dora Milaje are scattered throughout the movie, associated with Wakanda's many different tribes, of which the River Tribe, the Merchant Tribe or the Border Tribe, and conveying a sense of mixing and cultural blending. According to director Ryan Coogler, *"There are many African countries, each with different histories, mythologies and cultures. There are several tribes who live amongst each other and together they make the identity of their country"*.



Nigerian Igbo mask worn by Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan)
Marvel/Disney

Even Killmonger wears an aggressive-looking African mask called "Mgbedike", a symbol of masculinity in Igbo Nigerian folklore and rituals, as his trademark, completely twisting and redesigning its cultural meaning, contrasting with the rest of his all-American outfit and working as a reminder of the character's Wakandan origins. The same goes for him scarring his whole body, each scar representing a person he killed during his time in the army: scarification is a form of body modification carried out in certain African tribes as means of exhibiting one's social position. Killmonger doing it could indicate a desire for him to (re)claim his roots by appropriating African tribal traditions, even though they're stripped of their initial cultural meaning to be replaced by the villain's distorted one.



The brilliant score for the movie composed by Ludwig Göransson as well as the soundtrack, which was written by famous American artist Kendrick Lamar, also play an interesting role in the movie. Most of the score was inspired by and written as an homage to traditional African music and culture. It can be heard through the instruments that were used throughout the movie which elevates the atmosphere and the immersion of the viewer. The African music is contrasted by rap music which symbolizes African-American culture, especially through the character of the villain Erik Killmonger. Originating from Oakland, California, Erik grew up surrounded by the culture from poor black neighborhoods. This can be seen through his attitude and behavior as well as the soundtrack of the film. In Killmonger's theme we can notice some elements which act as reminders of African culture. The music adds a level of complexity and meaning to the story.



Marvel/Disney

All of these cultural elements allow us to get a glimpse of one side of Africa that's usually overlooked, most of the time due to stereotypes inherited from colonial imagination, absent from popular representations and public perceptions: a colorful melting pot of traditions, dialects -Xhosa and Yoruba- and customs, far from mainstream media and literary depictions. Indeed, the African continent has always been portrayed in a very negative light and looked down upon: it was, according to Victorians, the "Dark Continent", a place full of mysteries and savages, uncivilized and wild but also poor and dirty. In a way, the image conjured up by the word "Africa" is not so much of the actual continent as of a fictional space appropriated by white people, who have been using it as basis for building up tales filled with exoticism and black people's fetishization, stories suffused with clichés of all sorts, with *Tarzan* being one of the best known examples. These perceptions, ingrained in our collective psyche, influenced, without a shadow of a doubt, how Africans view themselves and, by extension, how African-Americans perceive the continent from which they supposedly come from, making them reject their origins and refusing, in a way, their African heritage. This is what Malcolm X addressed when he said, in his last public appearance in 1965: *"We didn't want anybody telling us anything about Africa, much less calling us Africans. In hating Africa and in hating the Africans, we ended up hating ourselves, without even realizing it. Because you can't hate the roots of a tree and not hate the tree. You can't hate your origin and not end up hating yourself. You can't hate Africa and not hate yourself"*.

This downgrading movement is being counterbalanced by Black Panther, which presents us with a set of Black African wonders, inviting Black Americans to embrace their African ancestry.



TOXIC TREATMENT OF WOMEN AND PEOPLE OF COLOR IN HOLLYWOOD.



Marvel/Disney

In terms of tearing apart the stereotype of a passive female character whose life solely depends on the masculine figures in her life, *Black Panther* does quite a good job.

As Virginia Woolf put it in her 1929 essay *A Room for One's Own*, ***"All these relationships between women are too simple. (...) I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. They are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men"***. This clever observation of a recurring pattern in fictional representation of women gave birth to a test which first appeared in a comic strip from 1985: the Bechdel Test. For a movie to pass this test, it needs to showcase at least two female characters talking to each other on a topic that doesn't revolve around their love or relationship to a male character. Nowadays, these requirements are only met by half the movies produced.

In *Black Panther's* case, however, the movie passes the test easily since it features several strong, independent female characters such as War Dog and Wakanda spy Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o), general of the Dora Milaje and head of the Wakanda's armed forces Okoye (Danai Gurira) but also T'Challa's smart and innovative little sister Shuri played by Letitia Wright. Those characters often interact with each other, discussing political and social matters, unrelated to their relationships with male characters. The scenes in which they fight alongside each other are probably some of the most interesting and entertaining ones and they steal the show during the casino fight and chase scene in Korea, making the spectator forget all about Black Panther's super-abilities and heroism.



Not only did *Black Panther* pass the Bechdel Test, it is also impossible not to talk more in depth about the movie's female characters. They are more than just the love interest of some male characters; they are warriors, inventors, leaders or even queens. T'Challa's sister Shuri, even if she is a princess, is not promised to a man and queen Ramonda succeeds in leading the country after her husband's death, acting as a big figure of authority. As it was instigated by DC's *Wonder Woman* movie, the issue of women's representation, hypersexualization and objectification in blockbuster movies has been addressed. Things are finally moving forward, as reflected in *Black Panther's* women characters, who inherited central roles, crucial to the unfolding of the story and getting rid of the clichéd representation of women. In *Wonder Woman's* case, things are slightly more ambiguous, even though the movie is considered to be a revolution because it was directed by a woman and because the main character is a female superhero. However the movie isn't quite as revolutionary as it was intended to be, partly due to the fact that the female characters, the Amazons, were still portrayed in a sexual light -they are dressed in revealing attires- and to the fact that the plot revolved a fair amount around the romantic interest between Wonder Woman and a white male character.

Everyone has seen those recurrent stereotyped characters in fictions such as the strong and charismatic hero, the superficial blond girl in distress, or the smart geeky kid with glasses. But clichés in movies do not only apply to typical personalities or appearances, they also target people of color, and thus the black community. Most of the time, in horror or catastrophe movies, they are always the first to die, or in general, they are the funny friend who breaks some serious and heavy scene with some laughs or bring a comic dimension to the movie. And of course, they are almost always just sidekicks, with the main hero being white.

Those characteristics indirectly make the black characters, or even those from minorities in general, look inferior in comparison with main white characters. They always have to be the people in distress, in need of help, saved by great and amazing white heroes. Brent Staples, a black author and an editorial writer for the New York Times, said in his article *"Black Characters in Search of Reality"* in 2012 that *"Through most of the 20th century, images of African-Americans in advertising were mainly limited to servants like the pancake-mammy Aunt Jemima and Rastus, the chef on the Cream of Wheat box"*. Of course this has changed over the years, African-American actresses and actors are more common on the big screen and the way Black characters are represented has evolved. But unfortunately they can still be victims of the "white vision" that is given to their community in movies, series or other creations, and they are often still stuck in the same roles, linked to their ethnicity or to their history of slavery.

In *Black Panther*, though, Ryan Coogler, the director, managed to get rid of those clichés. Besides, the role of the usually white heroes helping the skin colored minorities is mirrored, and it does not look awkward at all. But most of all, it seems to please the audience:



The white characters here are the villain Klaue played by **Andy Serkis** and the FBI agent Everett K. Ross played by **Martin Freeman**. In response to being asked what it felt like being one of the few non-black actors on set (and sometimes the ONLY non-black actor on set), Martin Freeman said "You think, '*Right, this is what black actors feel like all the time?*'" In fact, in *Black Panther* his character is the one being rescued by the main characters and the strong and handsome hero, they save his life after he got badly injured, he is the one needing help from a bigger community in opposition to what is usually seen in traditional movies.

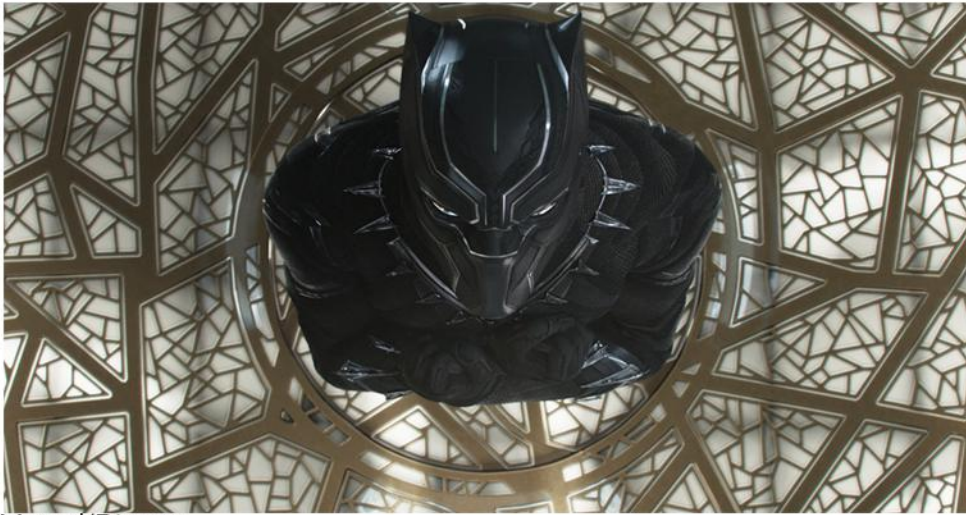
One other aspect of the typical "black character" that **Martin Freeman** and his comrade **Andy Serkis** fill is the role of comic relief. In the scenes where they interact with each other, during an interrogation when agent Ross asks Klaue "*You're telling me that the king of a Third World country runs around in a bulletproof cat suit?*" to which he answers "*Why don't you ask him yourself? He's right outside this very moment.*" as T'Challa is watching them behind a pane of tinted glass. Another example is in the middle of the casino scene when agent Ross says "*Well, you brought quite the entourage, do you have a mixtape coming out?*" when the action happens, injecting some mood-lightening humor with this mocking dig at Klaue and his acolytes, who ironically answers, "*Oh yeah, I'll actually send you a link.*"

Freeman also interacts with the main characters, for example right after he wakes up in Wakanda after being heavily wounded, he calls out to Shuri as she was working on her inventions and answers him with "*Don't scare me like that, colonizer!*". He asks, "*Is this Wakanda?*" to which she sarcastically responds, "*No, it's Kansas*". Here the white character brings the comedy to the scene by being made fun of, not only by delivering lines, which takes away the focus off him.

The villain performed by **Serkis** is a comic relief just by his presence, his performance and personality. He is the crazy and funny bad guy, randomly singing *What is Love* by Haddaway or yelling "*I can see you!*" at the tinted glass while being interrogated by Ross. He could be considered the "buffoon" of the movie, always stupidly breaking the serious tone of the scenes and even his own important and deepest moments. Still, he seems to be a real, threatening antagonist at the beginning of the movie. Those two white characters take on the part usually attributed to black characters and are relegated to secondary roles.

Black Panther is a great example of good casting because it respects the characters' ethnic background and that it did not fall into the practice of whitewashing - when white actors take on the role of characters originally from a different ethnicity.





Marvel/Disney

We are used to whitewashing in the cinema industry, it's no secret. Among the numerous movies suffering from this flaw, typical of Hollywood productions, we can name *The Great Wall* (2016) with **Matt Damon** in the main role as a Chinese warrior, *Pan* (2015) with **Rooney Mara** as famous Tiger Lily from *Peter Pan* who is supposed to be Native-American, or *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) with **Scarlett Johansson** as Japanese cyborg Motoko Kusanagi. The last example even brought people to start a petition for an Asian actress to replace **Johansson**. But we can notice some progress in regards to whitewashing with, for example, the upcoming Disney live-action remake of *Mulan*, in which the studio has finally chosen Chinese actress **Liu Yifei** to play the role of the courageous warrior. In this regard *Black Panther* is the first blockbuster movie to respect the original story with the movie being produced mainly by black people.

But can we talk about blackwashing? In the case of *Black Panther*, the answer is no. What we have here is not just one average white story that has been plastered onto a black cast. The plot is infused with cultural references and social elements addressing fundamentally black issues.

Since the action takes place in a fictional African country, the possibility of a white actor being part of the main characters would be nonsensical -if not completely racist- all the while allowing an all-black cast to look completely natural and legitimate. Ulysses Klaue, while asking Everett K. Ross what he knows about Wakanda, even says: *"Explorers have searched for it, called it El Dorado. They looked for it in South America, but it was in Africa the whole time. I'm the only one who's seen it, and made it out alive"*.

In fact, the only two moderately important white characters have almost no influence on the plot and, paradoxically, their lack of importance is precisely the reason why they fit in with the rest of the story. They are not the focal point and both make the story move forward only by interacting with the main characters. For example, Klaue allows the two main characters and rivals, Black Panther and Killmonger, to meet for the first time. Ross, on his part, provides crucial intelligence about the enemy as he decides to join the "good guys", fighting by their side during the last battle, offering them his piloting skills.

Black Panther is one-of-a-kind. For all the reasons aforementioned, it is a cinematographic revolution, opening a world of new possibilities in terms of creating relatable antagonists: the villain is not born inherently evil, his life experiences and struggles shape the villain he becomes. He has beliefs and aims of his own and they can be explained, but not always forgiven: history becomes the villain, just like in Killmonger's case, with colonization, slavery and centuries of discrimination turning him into the merciless killer he is. Unlike any other blockbusters before, *Black Panther* makes the world as we know it collapse by getting rid of all-too-familiar stereotypes and clichés all the while setting a new path for people to take, a path where black people play the same roles as white people in Hollywood movies. And that's not something to be afraid of.

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THE
WALKER
1



*“Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors
that jumped off the slave ships because
they knew death was better than
bondage...”*

Erik Killmonger