

BLACK PANTHER

INTERROGATING
A CULTURAL
PHENOMENON

TERENCE MCSWEENEY

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INTRODUCTION

A “defining moment for Black America” or Just a Movie?

Black Panther is a defining moment for Black America.

CARVELL WALLACE, *New York Times Magazine*, February 12, 2018

In this sense, black superheroes . . . are not only fantastic representations of our dreams, desires, and idealised projections of ourselves, they are also a symbolic extension of America’s shifting political ethos and racial landscape.

ADILIFU NAMA, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (2011, 1)

What does it mean to be African? That was the question I had been wondering since before I can remember. My parents described Africa to me as best they could. I knew that although I was living in America, my ancestors came from a different place—a place far away where we assume they were free of some of the struggles that we faced as a people here in the States, until one day they were captured, enslaved, and transported thousands of miles from their homeland. But the truth was, how could I know anything about a place that I, and no one I knew, had ever been. As I got older, I came to understand that Africa was the birthplace of human life. But the representations of Africa in the media were rarely positive and always incomplete. I had learned to take great pride in my family and my neighbourhoods, but

the images I saw about Africa often filled me with a sense of shame. I knew these images couldn't be the whole truth about Africa. . . . As for the question of what it means to be African, I found the answer in this project. . . .

RYAN COOGLER, quoted in Eleni Roussos, *The Art of Marvel Studios: Black Panther* (2018, 9)

I.

There are few films in the last decade that have had as much of a cultural impact as Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*, released in February 2018 as the eighteenth film in what is widely referred to as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), a franchise which had started almost exactly ten years before with the release of *Iron Man* in 2008. As the first film in the MCU with a Black protagonist and indeed the first superhero film with a Black character named in the title since *Hancock* (2008), *Black Panther* was eagerly anticipated by many, but none could have foreseen the levels of financial success it achieved and the acute social and cultural significance it acquired. On its way to earning a remarkable \$1.3 billion around the globe, the film broke several records and achieved many consequential "firsts" indicative of this impact: from having the biggest February American box-office opening of all time (\$202 million), to being the first film since *Avatar* (2009) to spend five weeks at number one (February 16–18 to March 16–18), to having the largest pre-ticket sales of any film not in the Star Wars franchise (1977–). It also had the largest opening weekend box office for a Black director in film history, became the highest grossing superhero film in the US of all time (\$700 million) and, perhaps most significantly, became the first superhero film ever to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture.¹

Kevin Feige—the architect behind Marvel's transition from comic book publisher to fully fledged film studio and home of the most financially successful film series ever produced, comfortably surpassing rival franchises like James Bond (1962–) and Star Wars (1977–), even though they have existed for decades

longer—suggested that *Black Panther* was the “best film we’ve [Marvel] ever made” (quoted in Fuster and Gonzalez 2018). Feige was not alone in holding this opinion through 2018 as a huge number of critics echoed these sentiments: many read along the lines of Bryan Bishop, writing at *The Verge*, who described it as “gripping, funny, and full of spectacle, but it also feels like a turning point, one where the studio has finally recognized that its movies can be about more than just selling the next installment” (2018), or Peter Travers at *Rolling Stone*, who wrote that it “raises movie escapism very near the level of art: You’ve never seen anything like it in your life” (2018). As unscientific as they are, review aggregator sites like Metacritic and Rotten Tomatoes also testify to how widely the film was embraced, with the latter having *Black Panther* at 97 percent “fresh,” putting it in unlikely company with *La Grande Illusion* (1937), *Psycho* (1960), *Alien* (1979), and *Boyhood* (2014). Carvell Wallace, in the epigraph used for the introduction above, called *Black Panther* “a defining moment for Black America,” a phrase which was regularly returned to in descriptions of the film (see also Prouix 2018). Others referred to it as a “watershed” (see Pitts Jr. 2018; Robbins 2018; Turner 2018) or a “milestone” (see Smith 2018; Mock 2018). These reactions were not only to be found in the United States, but spread around the globe too: in France in *Le Figaro*, the film was described as “a turning point in the representation of black people on screen” (anon. 2018), Pedro Moral in the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* said it was nothing less than “a movie to change the world” (2018), and Kenyan writer Abdi Latif Dahir, writing for *Quartz Africa*, declared: “This might sound very hyperbolic but I have never been more proud of being black and African” (quoted in Kazeem, Chutel, and Dahir 2018).

Why a superhero film, *of all genres*, prompted such reactions is one of the central questions this book seeks to explore. After all, aren’t films from the genre merely crudely reactionary tales featuring (mostly) men and women in tights vanquishing simplistic and stereotypical bad guys? How could a mere superhero film move audiences in such a way? It is a genre frequently lambasted by journalists and industry professionals with comments along the lines of “is the

superhero craze destroying the movies?" (Gillmore 2016) or "comic book movies are killing the movie industry" (Last 2016). Academy Award-winning director Alejandro González Iñárritu referred to the superhero film as "poison, this cultural genocide, because the audience is so overexposed to plot and explosions and shit that doesn't say anything about the experience of being human" (quoted in Fleming Jr. 2014), renowned graphic novelist Alan Moore, creator of *Watchmen* (1986–87) and *V for Vendetta* (1983–85), suggested that the wave of superhero films made during the first two decades of the twenty-first century should be regarded as a "cultural catastrophe" (quoted in Flood 2014) and acclaimed actress-turned-director Jodie Foster continued the environmental disaster metaphor with her comments in January 2018 discussing the genre when she remarked "Going to the movies has become a theme park . . . studios making bad content in order to appeal to the masses and shareholders is like fracking—you get the best return right now but you wreck the earth . . ." (quoted in Hodges 2018a). In October 2019, esteemed director Martin Scorsese referred to films from the genre as "not cinema," continuing, "Honestly, the closest I can think of them, as well made as they are, with actors doing the best they can under the circumstances, is theme parks. It isn't the cinema of human beings trying to convey emotional, psychological experiences to another human being" (quoted in Bell 2019).

It was not just critics that *Black Panther* seemed to resonate with; ordinary audiences were drawn to the empathetic T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman), the film's eponymous protagonist, in his journey from prince to king of the mysterious fictional African country of Wakanda. *Time* had previously declared that T'Challa was not just the richest superhero, but "almost undoubtedly the wealthiest fictional character of all time" (see Davidson 2015) with a fortune estimated at \$90.7 trillion, largely derived from Wakanda's access to the extraordinary substance known as vibranium described as "the rarest metal on earth" by Howard Stark (Dominic Cooper) in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011).² Its antagonist was also able to connect with viewers in ways that those from other films in the MCU hadn't; a character who goes by three names over the



Chadwick Boseman as T'Challa, aka the Black Panther, the first Black character as a protagonist in the MCU and a rare example of a Black superhero on the cinema screen.

course of *Black Panther*, arguably indicative of the crisis of identity he experiences. Played with a brooding intensity by Michael B. Jordan, the Wakandan name given to him by his father, Prince N'Jobu (Sterling K. Brown), is N'Jadaka, which is the name he seems to self-identify as and to which this book will primarily refer to him, but his American name is Erik Stevens and the nickname he is given during his time in the American military, both the Navy SEALs and JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command), for his talent and propensity for violence, is Killmonger.³ The character was described by many as the best villain in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (see Wittmer 2018; Schwerdtfeger 2018), “the most complex villain in the post-[*The Dark Knight* cycle of superhero blockbusters” (Vishnevetsky 2018), and even “the film’s true hero” by no less a cultural arbiter than Slavoj Žižek (2018; see also Faruqi 2018). The star of the film, Chadwick Boseman, suggested that he too empathized with N'Jadaka/Killmonger and that the character should be considered as symbolic of the broader social and political concerns of the African American community in ways we will see frequently echoed by audiences and academics too often to dismiss purely as hyperbole. He remarked, “I don’t know if we as African-Americans would accept T’Challa as our hero if he didn’t go through Killmonger . . . Because Killmonger has been through our struggle, and I [as T’Challa] haven’t” (quoted in Liao 2018).

These audiences and those who wrote and spoke about *Black Panther* are the object of study for this book almost as much as the film itself, with their reactions compiled from broadcast interviews, online reviews, commentaries, articles, and message boards, many of whom returned to similar ideas in their efforts to explain why the film had meant so much to them. According to the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) "Theme Report" of 2017, while African Americans comprised 12 percent of the total population of the United States, they made up on average only 10 percent of cinema ticket-buyers during the same year, but for *Black Panther* a remarkable 37 percent of its total domestic audience was African American.⁴ In connecting with so many, and not just African Americans, the film dispelled the notion that so called "Black-themed" films cannot be financially successful in the US and abroad, an idea that Scott Mendelson has called "the lesson that Hollywood refuses to learn" (2018). This was something that the actor Don Cheadle, himself no stranger to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, having played the character of James Rhodes/War Machine since *Iron Man 2* (2010), discussed on the release of his directorial debut *Miles Ahead* (2016), when he speculated

Is it really true that black movies don't sell overseas? If you don't sell them, sure. I know people who sell movies overseas who say, "When I've got the films in my briefcase and one of them is whatever movie that's got the black cast I don't even pull that one out because the presumption is they're not going to buy it." It becomes a fait accompli and a self-fulfilling prophecy. (quoted in Rees 2016)

A young woman by the name of Ilona Williams, interviewed by Philadelphia television channel 6ABC Action News in a segment entitled "Philly audiences find deeper meaning in *Black Panther*" (2018), commented on the very same topic: "I'm just as excited about this movie as about when Barack Obama became the first African American president for the United States, I have that same exhilaration because I can hand down this to my grandchildren, they can

see that it is possible for us to have black heroes.” Ilona Williams was not the only one to express this sentiment, as exaggerated as it might sound, as contributor for CNN Issac Bailey wrote something similar, that *Black Panther* was “for film what Barack Obama was for the presidency” (2018), and on 6ABC Action News, she was followed by another woman, this time unnamed, who stated, “It’s incredibly powerful for black people to see a film where we’re the superheroes finally. I’ve spent my whole life watching films with people who look nothing like me saving the day time and time again, and we get to be the sidekick . . . and this time *we were everything*.” This idea was also returned to by members of the cast and crew of the film. In an interview in *Entertainment Weekly*, Sterling K. Brown, the actor who plays the character of Prince N’Jobu, expressed his pride and satisfaction that “I get to take my kid to see a black superhero movie and he gets to see an image of himself as *the man*, and when I was a kid I got a chance to see Christopher Reeve [as Superman], I got a chance to see Michael Keaton [as Batman], but I didn’t get a chance to see Chadwick Boseman [as Black Panther]. Chadwick Boseman looks like me, *he looks like my son*” (2018). Around the time of the film’s release, New Yorker Frederick Joseph launched the #BlackPanther-Challenge, raising more than \$40,000 for children from Harlem to see the film at cinemas. Joseph said, “All children deserve to believe they can save the world, go on exciting adventures, or accomplish the impossible. I am grateful that all of you have answered the call and are taking action to help more kids watch their heroes on the big screen” (quoted in Edwards 2018).

What this diverse range of people collectively articulate is not an abstract concept nor an anecdotal one, as empirical studies by a range of individuals and institutions have documented the lack of diversity within the American film industry for decades. Furthermore, while there is a general consensus that we are currently living in an age in which diversity is more widely accepted and promoted than ever, this is not the case in terms of *actual* representation in the culture industries. While there have been several notable Black superheroes in comics over the years: for example, the likes of Black Panther himself (first appearance, July 1966), Falcon (September



The power of the world of *Black Panther*: fans dress up as their favourite characters in cosplay (photograph by Pat Loika).

1969), the John Stewart iteration of Green Lantern (December 1971/January 1972), Luke Cage (June 1972), Blade (July 1973), and Spawn (May 1992), cinematic incarnations of Black superheroes have been considerably less frequent and less impactful. Indeed, as mentioned above, in the ten years prior to the release of *Black Panther*, there was only a single high-profile superhero film with a Black actor as lead, *Hancock* (2008), starring Will Smith. Going back even further does little to improve these numbers, as in the ten years before *Hancock* we are left only with the disastrous Halle Berry vehicle, *Catwoman* (2004), and Wesley Snipes as Blade in the trilogy of films of *Blade* (1998), *Blade II* (2002), and *Blade Trinity* (2004): twenty years of the superhero genre, with the total number of films featuring African American leads able to be counted on the fingers of one hand.⁵

Outside of the superhero genre, in the American film industry as a whole things are slightly better, but not by much, as was revealed in a study of representation in popular films taken over eleven years entitled “Inequality in 1,100 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT & Disability from 2007 to 2017” (2018), led by Dr. Stacy L. Smith at the University of Southern California (USC), part of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. The study

found that only 12.1 percent of speaking characters in the top one hundred films of 2017 were Black, the lowest since 2012, with 2011 as the nadir in the time studied with just 9.1 percent. For Black women, the statistics are even more depressing, with forty-three of the top hundred films released throughout 2017, not too far away from half, featuring no Black female characters *at all*. Smith et al. conclude with a comment that the authors choose to present in bold for emphasis, “Overall, the findings reveal that no meaningful change has occurred in the percentage of Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or Mixed Race/Other characters during the years studied” (2018, 15). Moving behind the camera, this disparity continues, and across the entire eleven years and the 1,100 films studied only 5.2 percent were helmed by a Black/African American director.⁶ Another startling study led by Marc Choueiti called “Critic’s Choice 2: Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Film Reviewers Across 300 Top Films from 2015–2017” (2018) revealed that this inequality was even more prevalent on the fringes of the industry, noting that in the time studied 78.7 percent of reviews were written by white males, with only 13.1 percent of critics being male and of color, and 3.7 percent women of color. Marc Choueiti et al. similarly conclude:

In the three years examined, there was no meaningful change in the percentage of female critics or reviewers from under-represented racial/ethnic groups working across all reviewers or as Top critics. . . . Overall, this study adds to our knowledge regarding the inequity that exists in film criticism. As a key part of the filmmaking ecosystem, it is clear that the conversation is dominated by white male voices. What does it mean for audiences to have their impressions of a film filtered through this skewed group of reviewers?” (17/19)

With this context provided it is entirely understandable that many African American audiences would react in such a way to a film like *Black Panther*, which is directed, written, and features a cast of African American or African performers, with only two of its main roles occupied by Caucasians: Everett K. Ross (Martin Freeman)

and Ulysses Klaue (Andy Serkis).⁷ Around the time of its release a popular twitter feed called #whatblackpanthermeanstome was set up by Kayla Sutton, director of online marketing for *Black Girl Nerds*, after her young son had reportedly remarked to her about the character of Black Panther: “He’s awesome, he’s like the coolest in all of the comic books and all of the stuff. And he’s black like me” (quoted in Childs 2018). The complicated discourse at play here was rarely engaged with in any depth by the media, either in print or online, but was something expressed very clearly in an article by Jamil Smith which appeared in *Time*, “The Revolutionary Power of Black Panther”:

If you are reading this and you are white, seeing people who look like you in mass media probably isn’t something you think about often. Every day, the culture reflects not only you but nearly infinite versions of you—executives, poets, garbage collectors, soldiers, nurses and so on. The world shows you that your possibilities are boundless. Now, after a brief respite, you again have a President. Those of us who are not white have considerably more trouble not only finding representation of ourselves in mass media and other arenas of public life, but also finding representation that indicates that our humanity is multifaceted. Relating to characters onscreen is necessary not merely for us to feel seen and understood, but also for others who need to see and understand us. When it doesn’t happen, we are all the poorer for it. (2018)

This cursory engagement with just a few studies (and there are numerous others which come to very similar conclusions) has been largely rejected by many in a backlash which has labeled a discussion of these very real issues as an obsession with “identity politics,” with many of those who comment on the topic being dismissed as either SJWs (Social Justice Warriors) or found guilty of what is now described as “virtue signalling” (see Bartholomew 2015; Young 2016).



Matthew A. Cherry  
@MatthewACherry



#WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe It means that my kids and young black kids everywhere will see themselves as heroes capable of leading their own narratives. #RepresentationMatters

♡ 17.2K 4:45 PM - Feb 6, 2018



⌚ 4,148 people are talking about this



Neysha
@La_Ney_shaa



The Disney Princess I've been waiting my whole life for.

#BlackPanther

#WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe

♡ 8,238 6:00 AM - Feb 7, 2018

⌚ 2,555 people are talking about this



Princess Anastasia
@anamarbo88



You can't tell me that representation isn't important. You just can't. #WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe

♡ 4,981 1:25 PM - Feb 8, 2018

⌚ 2,152 people are talking about this



Amber Sessions @sessoms1011 · 18 Feb 2018



Bearing witness to major motion picture with predominately Black cast! WE are no longer invisible! Message brings to question: How are we going to COLLECTIVELY change the perpetual narrative of marginalized groups and center their voices? #WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe #BlackPanther



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The popularity of #whatblackpanthermeanstome offers an indication of what *Black Panther* came to mean to fans all over the world.

About the Author



Photo courtesy of the author

Terence McSweeney is senior lecturer in film and television studies at Solent University. He is the author of *The “War on Terror” and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second* and *Avengers Assemble! Critical Perspectives on the Marvel Cinematic Universe*.