



WE CREATE OUR OWN DEMONS: THE MCU'S ILLUSION OF PROGRESSIVISM

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ABSTRACT

This article explores examples of early films and characterizations in the Marvel Cinematic Universe that claim to present progressive depictions of minority cultures and races, yet fall short, as well as later installments that endeavor to provide more effective minority representations. Films such as *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 3* are examined for their problematic representations of Arabs, while *Black Panther* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* develop their African, Black, and Latinx characters with a much more genuinely progressive push. Utilizing race and cultural theory from the likes of Fredrick Aldama, Penelope Ingram, Evelyn Alsultany, and Ramzi Fawaz, this essay analyzes *Iron Man's* repackaging of Arab stereotypes under the guise of progressivism, *Black Panther's* Afrofuturist calls for Black solidarity in the face of a purportedly post-race society, and *Wakanda Forever's* exploration of the racial and generational trauma caused by the colonization of the Americas. Each of these works is also analyzed for how they reflect their contemporary cultural moment. From *Iron Man's* proximity to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, to *Black Panther's* development within an increasingly vocal anti-Black, anti-Latinx America, it is important to understand how the illusory progressivism with which we develop fictional minority characters can actually serve to further entrench racial and ethnic stereotypes and hurt the communities it intends to protect.

Keywords: race, racial representation, Afrofuturism, Latinxfuturism, film, comics, ethnicity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Marvel's *Iron Man 3* opens with the haunting tagline, "we create our own demons," a sentiment which has major implications within the confines of the film, wherein Tony Stark must face the consequences of his past mistakes, but it has even more drastic, wider implications for the world of American cinema at large. Pop-culture has the weighty task of representing and reflecting societal values within its cultural-historic moment. When pop-cultural works fail to live up to this task, it can become a dangerous vehicle of misinformation and misrepresentation. The demonization of American political enemies in film has long been a hoary method of fostering racial and political propaganda, attempting to construct a shared sense of purpose in its domestic (primarily white) audiences (Harvard 2014). Every one of white America's racial and political rivals has undergone a

period of cinematic vilification: The Japanese, Russians, Native Americans, African Americans, Mexicans, etc. Few peoples have been exempt from American cinema's brand of nationalistic, jingoistic persecution (Weikle 2020).

Historically, representations of racial minorities in film have either been plagued by persistent negative stereotypes, limited to roles of regulation, or have been essentially nonexistent (Clark 1969). Cinematic minority depictions of the Middle East, for example, have largely been dramatized and relegated to scenes of the fantastical and magical, and/or as a backward, uncivilized desert wasteland. Films like *Dune* (1984), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Aladdin* (1992), and *The Mummy* (1999) fictionalize the Middle East in just such a light, portraying their Arab and Arab-coded characters in such a limited scope and with such regularity that these shallow caricatures of Arabs in film have become the persistent stereotypes of Arabs in audience perception (Shaheen 2003; Al-sultany 2013). In similar fashion, and thoroughly documented by cultural critics such as Donald Bogle and Frederick Aldama, Black and Latinx actors have long been relegated to the roles of slaves, thugs, and sidekicks (Bogle 2001; Aldama 2019; Facciani et. al. 2015). It wasn't until the Blaxploitation and L.A. Rebellion art movements of the 1970s and 80s that artists were able to take steps to affect changes in the socio-political roots of American cinema's minority representation, a move in cinema that Bogle dubs "A Black New Wave" which nonetheless "failed to create a diversity of images. For the new African American cinema to be vital, it had to ... move beyond the 'hood' to include ... varied aspects of Black life" (Bogle 2001, 312-14), moves which have since been taking place in films of the twenty-first century.

These moves and changes can be clearly mapped through the progression of superhero films since the 1980s. In the decades following the highly popular *Superman* (1978) and *Batman* (1989), mainstream superhero films and television shows have quickly and steadily become more inclusive and diverse in their minority representation. Films and shows around the turn of the twenty-first century, including *The Crow* (1994), *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1995), *Men in Black* (1997), *Spawn* (1997), *Steel* (1997), *Blade* (1998), *X-Men* (2000), *The Incredibles* (2004), *Heroes* (2006-2010), and *Batman Begins* (2008), have greatly contributed to a drastic uptick in the importance of diverse representation in superhero films (Katz 2021; Facciani, et. al. 2015) and paved the way for the mega blockbuster DC Extended Universe and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Undeniably the more successfully cohesive of the two, the MCU has seen one long story through a variety of cultural movements and changes. From 2008's *Iron Man* to 2023's *The Marvels*, these cultural changes are reflected in the evolution of minority representation in these films over time.

The Iron Man series are earlier films in the MCU that were developed and released in the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and, as such, the *Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 3* (2013) filmmakers utilized the contemporaneous War on Terror and

established Arab stereotypes to tell their story, though purporting in interviews to be self-aware and meta-critical of their depiction of Arab characters. The films lean heavily into racial Arab stereotypes and make use of satire and sardonicism in their attempt to criticize Western audiences' willingness to accept conventional stereotypical minority representations (Chitwood 2019). Despite their intended criticism, the Iron Man films ultimately fail in their goal thanks to a lack of authenticity of diversity in the filmmaker's construction of representations of minority characters—something Aldama calls a lack of *will to style* (Aldama 2017, 89). Instead, they end up re-emphasizing and repackaging racist minority stereotypes without ever truly getting around to any substantial changes, and effectively fostering these stereotypes in the minds of general audiences and merely emboldening the spirit of American militarism, nationalism, and an ideology of Western superiority.

These issues are not representative of the MCU as a whole, however. Embracing Bogle's call for variation and Aldama's hope-filled notion of a "definite heartbeat" in the general trajectory of Latinx representation (Aldama 2019, *ix-x*), more recent MCU films such as *Black Panther* (2018) and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022) offer far more diverse representations of minorities, successfully circumventing the damaging African and Mesoamerican stereotypes that dog the Arab representations in *Iron Man*. By embracing an authenticity of diversity and focusing on building well-rounded *human* characters, *Black Panther* runs where *Iron Man* stumbled: successfully constructing stories about racial minority characters and modern cultural issues without furthering harmful internalized racist tropes.

2. GROUNDING FANTASY IN REALITY

Obviously, comic books and their film counterparts are not exactly known for their realism, but Ramzi Fawaz and Darieck Scott hold to the representational capacity of the comics medium, where "anything that can be drawn can be believed—often if not most times with little or no attention to verisimilitude between what is represented on the page and what we perceive in the three-dimensional world beyond" (Fawaz and Scott 2018, 201). They're fantastical, they're wonderfully creative, and sometimes flat out weird, but, most importantly, they are not depictions of reality. Locations are fabricated, situations are exaggerated, and the characters depicted are extraordinary, dramatic, and over-the-top. But in the late twentieth century, live-action television and film adaptations of comic books began to change all of that. These adaptations broke from the campy Gold/Silver Age comic style of entertainment, most notably with Tim Burton's *Batman* series, and brought superheroes to prominence with general audiences. Dramatic depictions of comic characters, darker adult themes, and rubber-nippled super-suits helped repopularize the genre (Johnson 2023). At the turn of the 21st century, gritty, grounded, big-budget superhero films were dominating the big and small screens. Films such as *X-Men*,

Unbreakable (2000), *Spider-Man* (2002), *V for Vendetta* (2005), and *Batman Begins* were a far cry from their comic book origins and twentieth century film counterparts in one major regard: filmmakers took great pains to ground these stories in a convincing, credible reflection of our own reality. While superheroes today have now become more comfortable in bringing back magic, ethereal superpowers, and an airy comic-bookish sense of wonder, there was a long stretch of time where film adaptations of superheroes were painstakingly “realistic.” Batman went from spandex to Kevlar and military grade armor. Iron Man hand-made his suits on screen to prove their realism to the audience. Heroes spent time learning how to fight, how to hone their individual skills, and “scientific” jargon like gene mutation and gamma radiation were used to ground the notion of superpowers. This style of superhero film was incredibly popular and quickly became the standard for 21st century comics-to-movie adaptations.

Grounding superheroes in a reality that directly reflects our own and basing superpowers in science (fiction) resulted in major changes. Superhero films became immensely popular and lucrative. Where superheroes had once been relegated to the nerdy fringes of society, these films officially brought them to the mainstream. But films such as these are more than simple pop entertainment; as Adilifu Nama reminds us, they are a “powerful lens by which to observe the collective racial desires, constructs, fantasies, and fears circulating throughout American society” (Nama 2008, 2), and with this newfound surge in popularity comes an ideological problem. These sorts of films feed into the subconscious minds of general audiences a subtle notion that they are scientific, and therefore authentic, representations of our reality. These stories were no longer wild fantasies relegated to the wacky pages of comics, they were depicted as “real life,” and by pushing this gritty realism formula, what we see on-screen is intended to be real, making their depiction of racial representation in their films all the more important.

The superhero film genre in general, Katherine Cox contends, can move audiences to unconsciously internalize these fictitious experiences and use these films to live a hybrid life by

[Occupying] the liminal space between ordinary citizen and extraordinary sovereign, [which] becomes refigured as a nexus in which consumer and character overlap. This situates the superhero genre as a distinctive site of... fantasy where consumers re-experience the affective entanglements produced by membership of a shared intimate public through their own entanglement with the hero. (Cox 2020, 98)

While Cox obviously does not mean that there are those that believe Iron Man is actually flying around out there in our reality, by overlaying the comic-film narrative on a simulated reality instead of an overtly fictional universe, the Iron Man films, and other reality-based action-hero stories like them, subtly influence the viewer’s perception of both their simulated and actual realities. These are the stories that seem “innocuous because they’re fantastic and unreal; yet... because they transpose our reality into a fictional

world, [they] have considerable power to structure and guide our response to the social landscape” (Ingram 2023, 15). This sort of structural work doesn’t happen instantaneously, of course; influence of this nature requires constant ideological exposure to a multitude of films, shows, streaming networks, news outlets, etc., all feeding a common narrative. Media is directly involved in the production and transformation of ideologies, and through these media events, the Western view of Eastern cultures is delicately filtered in an effort to allow white American audiences to view other(ed) cultures through a comfortable Western lens (Said 2003; Hall 1981; Lockman 2004).

3. SITUATIONAL REALISM

3.1 *IRON MAN AND THE WAR ON TERROR*

Beyond this new aesthetic realism, the MCU is also grounded in *situational* realism. From the get-go, *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 3* make use of early-2000s American audiences’ familiarity with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda terrorist video propaganda and imagery. The depictions of the fictional Middle Eastern terrorist organization, The Ten Rings, as well as their leader, The Mandarin, draw very stark visual parallels between their simulated reality and our actual reality. The terrorist imagery in the films is intentionally paralleled with the familiar imagery of al-Qaeda propagandized hostage execution videos that were widely circulated for the first decade of the 2000s. With these methods, *Iron Man* intentionally positions itself as an analog for American nationalism and Stark becomes a stand-in for the US military and War on Terror campaign, through whom the white American audience gets to experience a sense of patriotic pride (Jenkins and Secker 2022).

The Mandarin has never been free of this problematic, deliberately filtered stereotyping. When he was introduced in Marvel’s *Iron Man* comics back in 1964, he was a stereotypical Far East Asian villain of indeterminate nationality, emblematic of the Yellow Peril era of filmmaking. The United States’ battle against communism at the height of the Vietnam War and fear of being overwhelmed by the relatively high populations of the Far East Asian countries contributed greatly to this oriental racist fear (Semmerling 2006). In 2013’s *Iron Man 3*, Ben Kingsley portrays a Middle Eastern version of the character, reflecting the filmmaker’s desire to update to reflect the “Arab Peril” of the current socio-political climate.

3.2 *BLACK PANTHER AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT*

Ten years after *Iron Man* was first released, Ryan Coogler developed *Black Panther* and allowed the film to explore the more magical, mystical side of comic book lore by combining the familiar technologically grounded superhero with the ancestrally powered heart-shaped herb. Despite this foray into magic and mysticism, *Black Panther* works just as hard as the Iron Man series to ground itself in situational realism. The film opens with

the 1992 televised broadcast of the LA riots, incited in response to the brutal beating of Rodney King at the hands of racist police. Immediately juxtaposed by the fight between King T'Chaka and N'Jobu (a fight later taken up by their respective sons, T'Challa and N'Jadaka (Killmonger)), the scene embodies the Black infighting that has been a major source of contention in the Civil Rights movement since the 1960s. The Civil Rights movement has been characterized by different forms of activism, popularly narrowed to the peaceful, righteous activism of Martin Luther King Jr. and the more violent, iconoclastic methods of Malcom X. Each of these Civil Rights leaders fought for equality and liberty in different ways, each disagreeing with the other's methods, but seeking the same ends (Song 2024). Fast-forward to the 2010s, and the work of the Civil Rights movement is still in full swing. Racial unrest is being stoked by the election of the United States' first Black president, Barack Obama, his racially antagonistic successor, and the steady rise of racist police brutality across the nation. This is the real-world context in which *Black Panther* is framed and grounded.

Because of the palpable racial tension of the 2010s, representation in *Black Panther* was under major scrutiny from the beginning. Unlike *Iron Man*, which started the MCU and was under relatively little pressure to fairly represent its minority characters, *Black Panther* was released at the height of the MCU's popularity and advertised itself as the first majority Black cast-and-crew-led superhero film, garnering immediate attention and criticism from all sides. Capturing the cultural vibe surrounding the film, Jamil Smith describes *Black Panther* as

Not just a movie about a black superhero; it's very much a black movie... serving a black audience that has long gone under-represented. For so long, films that depict a reality where whiteness isn't the default have been ghettoized, marketed largely to audiences of color as niche entertainment, instead of as... mainstream. (Smith 2018, para. 29)

The regressive socio-political moment in which *Black Panther* grounds itself creates a meta-critical situation, much like the *Iron Man* series did, though *Black Panther* nurtures a tone of struggle and resistance.

Grounding *Black Panther* in a cultural moment that is so much closer to home creates a simulated reality with which many Americans can more easily identify. Where *Iron Man* acts as a criticism of how Americans perceive foreigners and the Middle East, *Black Panther* criticizes how we perceive and treat people in our own backyard. The final scene in *Black Panther* sees T'Challa addressing the UN, stating that "Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows... We will work to be an example of how we... should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence" (Coogler 2018, PAGE), driving home the film's main call to action both in-story and in our reality.

Namor and Latinx Civil Rights

Wakanda Forever, the second film in the Black Panther series, incorporates another historically marginalized community: the Yucatec Mayans. A fictional community that has been in hiding since the 1500s, the Talokanil, the people that inhabit the underwater city of Talokan, managed to escape the genocidal destruction that the Spanish and other European conquerors inflicted on the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, providing the Talokanil with the recourse necessary to develop their society free from the effects of colonialization.

The representation of the Indigenous Mesoamerican peoples in cinema is convoluted and layered. In American cinema, Latinx representation is problematic, often reducing representation to a singular image, flattening both white and Black Mexican actors and characters into the generic “Hispanic,” which reinforces a simplistic lack of an authentic diversity of representation (Aldama 2017). But in Mexico and other Latin American countries where Indigenous Mesoamerican ancestry is still prevalent, the history of Spanish colonialist imperialism has embedded a system of color-based racism tied to the phenotypical characteristics of Mesoamerican Indigeneity where lighter-skinned *mestizos* are privileged over the darker-skinned *morenos*. Mexican cinema and media have long suppressed representation of Indigenous *morenos* in favor of lighter-skinned *mestizo* Latinx actors (García Blizzard 2022, 4).

In his autoethnography, *Orgullo Prieto (Brown-Skin Pride)* (2022), Tenoch Huerta discusses the racist issues he has faced throughout his life, his experiences with and feelings about racial bigotry in Mexico and Latin America, and what it meant for Maya representation that he is able to land roles such as that of Namor in *Wakanda Forever*. An authentic diversity of representation is important to Huerta, who argues that it is in seeing someone that looks like you reflected in media that promotes the aspiration to fight oppressive systems. But “[t]hose that [perpetuate] Mexico’s systemic racism... [are] not the light-skinned people, but the other brown-skinned people like me who grew up... as victims of the ideologies and myths that affect one group to the benefit of another” (Huerta 2022, 148), Huerta states, discussing the ways in which systemic racism in Mexico creates a racial caste system, much like that of the United States, that is unintentionally preserved by the very people it oppresses. *Wakanda Forever’s* Mesoamerican representation consisted almost entirely of these *moreno* Latinx actors, rather than Mexico’s traditional reliance on white *mestizo* Latinx actors, prompting a familiar media-storm in Mexico about Marvel’s “forced diversity” in Latinx representation (Ramirez 2022, 13–15).

Grounding the Marvel Cinematic Universe series in these sorts of current sociopolitical events adds a tangible level of realism to the films that suggests to viewers that they understand what exactly is at stake. Our heroes, the world they inhabit, and the conflicts that they are fighting are designed to reflect our reality, so it only follows that the representations of minorities in the films, are also *meant to be real*.

4. SIMPLIFIED COMPLEX REPRESENTATION

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the sudden rush of political/war dramas in film and television did not depict Arabs with the usual absolutist wave of vilification that had become a hallmark of twentieth century American cinema. In fact, the U.S. president at the time, George W. Bush, made it a point to publicly decry the conflation of Arabs and Muslims with terrorism in an attempt to curb the inevitable acts of racial violence against Arab Americans, reasoning,

The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying... to hijack Islam itself. The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists... The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam... Islam is peace. These terrorists don't represent peace. They represent evil and war. (Bush 2001)

And while there was, of course, plenty of Arab and Muslim vilification in news media, film and television had an equal and opposite wave of sympathetic representation wherein Arab characters were portrayed as the victims of injustice in the wake of post 9/11 racist hatred (Semmerling 2006; Alsultany 2013).

On the surface, this unprecedented move looks like progress and a victory for diversity and inclusion. But this notion was nothing more than the *illusion* of progress. In a move that Evelyn Alsultany has dubbed Simplified Complex Representation, media began to include depictions of Arab minorities that “appear[ed] to challenge or complicate former stereotypes and contribute to a multicultural or post-race illusion. Yet... programs that employ simplified complex representational strategies promote logics that legitimize racist policies and practices” (Alsultany 2012, 21).

Alsultany identifies several such strategies in post 9/11 representation, including:

- Inserting the Patriotic Arab or Muslim
- Sympathizing with the Plight of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11
- Flipping the Enemy, and
- Humanizing the Terrorist

These are the forms of representation that seem progressive, meaningful, and forward-thinking, but can be, in effect, just as shallow and damaging as the evil terrorist stereotype.

“We create our own demons” is a major recurring theme in *Iron Man 3*. Aldrich Killian and through him, the screenwriters, took every trope that they knew Americans fear about the Middle East and constructed a boogeyman, an uber-terrorist in the form of the Mandarin. The Mandarin is depicted in what Jack Shaheen (1997) calls the “Instant Ali Baba kit... [A] robed actor with dark sunglasses, fake black beard, exaggerated nose... and checkered burnouses” (172). His character is designed as an Osama bin Laden clone in order to evoke that same sense of dread that news footage of bin Laden evoked in Western audiences. The Mandarin even spreads fear in a way that was common in post 9/11

American life: anonymity. “You don’t know who I am, you don’t know where I am, and you’ll never see me coming” (Black 2013) is one of The Mandarin’s propagandized quotes that embodies the panic of the early 2000s. Sowing the seeds of mistrust within its enemy is a hallmark of terrorism, but it is more than just an intimidation line about terrorists hiding among us. It’s a verbalization of America’s tendency to vilify and hate that which it does not understand. In these ways, *Iron Man 3* deliberately draws attention to this Western construction of the Mandarin as the embodiment of all things Middle Eastern. In the MCU, the Mandarin is not the actual leader of the Ten Rings (at least not until Marvel retconned the character, including the real Mandarin in 2021’s *Shang-Chi*). Killian literally creates the Mandarin as a scapegoat to cover up his illegal bioweapon experiments. In this way, Killian hijacks Americans’ conceptualizations of the Middle East and uses them for his own benefit. Throughout the film, hints are dropped about the identity of the Mandarin. First in the “we create our own demons” tag line, then again in one of The Mandarin’s terrorist propaganda films, which features the Mandarin ruminating on the inauthenticity of Chinese fortune cookies. Just as the fortune cookie and the Mandarin are constructed in the minds of Western audiences, so too is the concept of the Middle East as a hub of terrorism (Said 2003; Lockman 2004).

Despite *Iron Man 3*’s ironic depictions of the Mandarin, the Iron Man series falls victim to Alsultany’s Simplified Complex Representations, which work to simply repack-age and reenforce damaging stereotypes. Even though it is a film series that is so blatantly militarized and propagandized, and in spite of the deliberate stereotyping of the Mandarin, the Iron Man series tries hard to avoid representing all its Arab characters as terrorists. Tony Stark’s entire reason for fighting is born out of the death of his Arab savior, Ho Yinsen. Yinsen is a representation of one of the good, patriotic Arab friends-of-America that Bush referenced in his speech. He is the only Arab character in the film willing to help Tony Stark in his fight against the Ten Rings. Allegorically, Yinsen is supportive of American militarism in the form of Tony Stark, and, as such, he represents an unsubtle ideological binary built by American cinema: Arabs are either friends of America, or they are terrorists. The Iron Man films generalize and fictionalize their Arab terrorist characters, removing the religious extremism aspect entirely, vaguely defining their language differences, and aside from being in Afghanistan, they avoid mention of any actual Middle Eastern locations. In the same vein, the non-terrorist Arabs in the Iron Man films are depicted as little more than genericized victims of the War on Terror. These innocent Arabs are hapless civilians caught in the middle of a conflict in which they are not a part, yet the established binary leaves no room for Arabs that do not take sides in the fight.

These Simplified Complex Representations give the illusion that American cinema is providing a greater variety of representations of Arabs in the film. However, all this achieves is the minimization of Arab existence, enforcing the reductive binary of friend or foe. Yinsen is not considered good or bad based on his relationship to the Middle East

but based on his relationship to America. The filmmaker's garish parading of a false diversity helps it seem like they are being inclusive in this regard, but since it's wrapped up in the more easily digested cautionary message about the dangers of Arab terrorism, the sentiment falls flat.

The Simplified Complex Representations in the Iron Man series recreate another problematic binary identified by Edward Said: that of the technologically and intellectually superior West over the analog, unintelligent East (Said 2003). From the beginning of the film, this binary forms the core of the Iron Man franchise. Stark makes the best technology, creating advanced and horrifyingly efficient weaponry systems in the name of American military defense. The U.S. is the pinnacle of technological advancement, and everyone wants their piece of the pie. The Ten Rings steal Tony's weapons and Tony himself, and they make it their goal to get their hands on his finished armor. Meanwhile, they themselves are literally living in caves and tents, eating gruel and warming themselves by trashcan fires. They are depicted as not being able to build weapons or utilize technology on their own. In fact, in the months that Tony is supposed to be building a missile for them, he instead builds an entire suit of armor right under their noses.

Tony's mentor and fellow U.S. military industrialist, Obadiah Stane, is ultimately revealed to be the bankroller and instigator of the terrorists' acts. Stane condescendingly notes that "technology [has] always been [their] Achilles heel in this part of the world" (Favreau 2008), as he manages to hoodwink his terrorists, utilizing superior technology to paralyze and kill them, thereby ensuring that he is the only one benefiting from their collaboration. As the Ten Rings are the stand-in for the Middle East and Stane/Stark for the U.S., then in Stane's act of paralyzing and eliminating the Ten Rings, the U.S. has both literally and figuratively stripped the Middle East of its agency, infantilizing and exploiting an entire culture for profit.

While these instances of representation, the good Arab, the Arab victim, and even the terrorist/Mandarin technically achieve the screenwriters' goal of providing a multifaceted, however limited, view of Arab characters, the issue with these representations, and the issue facing those that see these representations as improvements over the traditional stereotypes, is that they are still representing Arabs as part of the system of terrorism with no alternative representation. Within the entire Iron Man franchise, there is not a single Arab character that is not presented as either inept pawns or victims, or as perpetrators of violence themselves, while the numerous white characters are free to develop and remain apart from the conflict.

5. ACTUAL COMPLEX REPRESENTATION

5.1 *BLACK PANTHER AND BLACK REPRESENTATION*

On the other end of the spectrum, the Black Panther series sought to deliberately disrupt traditional stereotypes by building an expansive story of minority excellence, ingenuity, justice, and geopolitics. Straying from the common post-racial pretext, the Black Panther series tackles the generational effects colonialism, oppressive racist systems, and slavery head-on, directly addressing the European conquest and exploitation of African and Mes-american peoples. Ramzi Fawaz argues that in pitting the superhero against social issues such as racism and minority misrepresentation, we “[reduce] the figure to an instrument of social justice... rather than a site of popular fantasy where the kinds of solidarities required to transform the conditions that enabled these atrocities could be brought into being” (Fawaz 2016, 235). It is these solidarities and reimagined social conditions that *Black Panther* brings to the table, doing away with any postracial posturing or misrepresentations of a postracial society. Race is important and, to those of us living with raced labels, a societal war is being fought against an ingrained, systemic enemy, but presenting the story as a simple hero-vs.-issue narrative is reductive and could have actually served to hurt the cause. To get around that, the stories told in these films are of layered, intricate, human characters that each have their own story to tell, and which present *Actual* Complex Representations of minorities that do not fall into the same pitfalls that they do in *Iron Man*. Without leaning into stereotypes, the Black Panther series creates a fascinating world in which an authentic diversity of minority representation, and the social issues analyzed within, are both dynamic and real.

Traditionally, the Simplified Complex Representational act of flipping the enemy has been used to shock the audience by playing on racial expectations, usually to the same artificially progressive effect as we see with the Obadiah Stane reveal in *Iron Man* (Alsultany 2013). While still playing off racial expectations with characters like Ulysses Klaue, *Black Panther* makes use of minority villain characters in Killmonger and Namor to subvert this issue. The use of a villain that claims the same raced status as the heroes avoids the issue of the representational power imbalance that comes from pitting white characters against minorities. Furthermore, the characters and villains do not stand in for such binary positions as good vs. evil. Throughout the film we see these characters grapple with their own understandings of identity, justice, and revenge without reducing them to a series of civil rights positional stand-ins. These characters are more complicated than that.

In both Black Panther films, we see regular use of interpersonal and political conflict with our heroic characters. T’Chaka kills his own brother and abandons young Killmonger in 1990s Oakland, all in order to protect Wakanda and himself. T’Challa makes reserved and naïve choices out of loyalty to the memory of his father in order to protect the status quo. His interactions with Killmonger enable him to see the error of Wakanda’s isolationist ways, and the detrimental effect that it has had on non-Wakandan diasporic Black communities worldwide. Even though he agrees with Killmonger’s mission, he

cannot abide his means and therefore “cannot rest while [Killmonger] sits on the throne. He is a monster of [Wakanda’s] own making” (Coogler 2018) and as such, presents a threat to the balance that T’Challa is sworn to protect. And even though he defeats Killmonger, T’Challa does not leave his battle the same man. The notion that everything he believes is based on a lie and that the villain that he just killed was right weighs heavily on T’Challa, who ultimately decides to move forward with a version of Killmonger’s plan, hybridized with the humanitarian goals of Nakia. What really makes Killmonger’s representation complex, however, is that the movie isn’t an anti-revolution story just because they villainized the Black man that wanted to incite global Black revolution against their white oppressors, it’s a story about how Black communities can work together and the best ways in which they can support and carry out their obligations to one another (Johnson 2018). It’s a story about what revolution could look like. T’Challa chooses to incite revolution by using Wakanda’s wealth to free diasporic Black people through the provision of humanitarian aid and educational and cultural outreach. In this way, T’Challa allows them to liberate themselves and each other.

The villains in the Black Panther films are famously complex. While they are depicted as “villains” in the traditional sense of a comic book movie, Killmonger’s and Namor’s roles function less like the clear-cut warped reflections of the hero that we see with Stark and Stane, and more like speculative doubles which depict a what-might-have-been version of T’Challa. This creates authentic interpersonal interactions that continually pull the characters in morally ambiguous directions. Like T’Challa and Shuri, Killmonger and Namor are driven by a strong sense of justice. And even though Killmonger ultimately cannot see past his desire for vengeance and power, both he and Namor seek to liberate their respective peoples from oppressive racist systems. In framing Black Panther’s villains so, “[Ryan] Coogler shines a bright light on... how Black Americans endure the real-life consequences of [the psychic scars of slavery] in the present day. Killmonger’s... rage over how he and other Black people across the world have been disenfranchised and disempowered is justifiable” and is therefore relatable to modern American audiences (Smith 2018, n.p.).

In the wake of the *Black Panther* release, social media was flooded with viral tags like #killmongerwasright. Killmonger’s mission and motivations rang true for so many people, that many considered Killmonger to be more hero than villain. *Wakanda Forever* explores this moral ambiguity by imbuing Shuri with a deeply personal tie to Killmonger. As Shuri takes on the mantle of Black Panther, we see her subconsciously siding with Killmonger’s way of thinking as she meets with him on the Ancestral Plane, a sympathetic point of view that eventually helps her find common ground with Namor.

5.2 NAMOR AND LATINX REPRESENTATION

The Wakandans recognize their fight in the Talokanil culture, one that was not so lucky as to completely escape persecution and oppression. Talokan is a Mesoamerican utopic society that is nevertheless more of a retreat more than a paradise. Due to Spanish oppression, the Talokanil were driven underwater in order to survive rather than evolving as a “natural,” sheltered powerhouse like Wakanda. In challenging the use of Simplified Complex Representations and demanding Actual Complex Representation, we, as the audiences being represented, can push back against white hegemonic systems that maintain “their backwards, insipid, indefensible arguments... [that] it is impossible to dismantle the racist systems that they have worked so hard to support” (Huerta 2022). As Huerta and Ingram make very clear, every act of authentically diverse representation in television, film, and literature offers alternative versions of race and racial identity that serve to resist hegemonic whiteness and the misrepresentations of minorities that they have long perpetuated (Huerta 2022; Ingram 2023). Coogler develops Namor is a complicated character whose anger and hatred of the surface world empowers him to play a geopolitical war game and pit his perceived enemies against one another. He wants what’s best for his people and is willing to do anything in his considerable power to make that happen.

In this way, Coogler frames the character of Namor, who blends Killmonger’s justifiable anger with T’Challa’s righteous devotion to his people, as a speculative double of T’Challa and Wakanda, focusing on Huerta’s call to utilize racial representation as a method of resistance. Depicting Mesoamerican history and mythology as a dynamic force of power rather than the remains of a victimized Indigenous population was Huerta’s and Coogler’s ultimate goal in their interpretation of Talokan (Coogler and Geek Culture 2022, n.p.). They wanted to pull focus away from Atlantis and its Eurocentric, Greco-Roman roots, and deliver a society that depicted the other side of Wakanda’s racially progressive nation. When it was announced that Marvel would be adapting Atlantis to Mesoamerican mythology, there was a general feeling of unease concerning the way Mayan representation would be depicted. Critics like David Anderson famously made their concerns known on social media: “If you [Marvel Studios] imply the achievements of the Maya people were in anyway due to a connection with Atlantis, you are implying that indigenous Americans needed help from Europeans to have that success” (Anderson 2022). But Marvel Studios was way ahead of him. Ryan Coogler’s deliberate pivot away from Atlantis’ European roots denies the imperialism that the original myth advocates, wherein Atlantis worked tirelessly and selflessly to “civilize” the rest of the non-European world.

This Latinxfuturization of Atlantis, morphing it into the technologically advanced Mayan haven of Talokan, does much the same for Indolatino representation as the Afrofuturization of Wakanda does for African representation in superhero films (Aguilar 2022). Without the incorporation of a white European crutch, the Talokanil’s techno-cultural advancement is allowed to be attributed to their own intelligence and ingenuity,

rather than being the “beneficial” byproduct of European imperialization. Similarly, in their endeavor to avoid stereotyping the Maya, both in cultural depiction and physical costuming, Marvel Studios made sure to enlist the help of cultural experts with ties to Maya heritage, including Dr. Gerardo Aldana and the Mayan cultural-historian group known as Maya K’ajlay. Maya K’ajlay were intentional in their ahistorical depiction of Talokan and Namor (Coogler and Geek Culture 2022; Leachman 2023)

Because Aldana and Maya K’ajlay derived the Talokanil’s wardrobe and cultural representations from ancient Maya depictions of K’uk’ulkan, some critics of the film contend that adaptations of Mayan garb are, in themselves, an act of racial stereotyping. This argument falls in line with the numerous arguments surrounding Wakandan costuming throughout the series, which allege that depicting African tribes in primitive, “uncivilized” ethnic attire, dressed as monkeys and running around with clubs and spears is racist and appropriative (Slaats 2018). What these arguments fail to take into account, however, is that the notion of traditional “ethnic” attire being primitive is very much a white Western mindset of correctness and is, in itself, a racist act of imposition on the part of white supremacy (Ziyad 2018). Throughout the Black Panther series, we see instances of traditional African practices, traditions, and symbology that have been hybridized with modern/futuristic technology, blending “[m]etaphysics and aesthetics... together in Coogler’s production in ways that extend and develop Afrofuturist readings of the film” (Ingram 2023, 291). Cloaks that function as shields, beads and sand tables that act as communication devices, spears and clubs that have been incorporated into energy weapons, and even water drums that operate the Wakandan border shield.

Wakanda Forever depicts the same advancements in Maya technology and society, with an advanced tech-driven city of steppe pyramids, a man-made underwater sun and ocean-current highways, as well as advanced vibranium Mayan weaponry and armor. This hybridization of traditional cultural aspects and modern technology is peak Afro/Latinxfuturism at work: the speculative-fictional rendering of what these two civilizations could have built had they not succumbed to European colonialization; the type of civilization that Namor could only dream of as he ruminates upon the history of the Maya and African peoples and which reflects the current cultural lament of what might have been.

6. CONCLUSION

In every one of *Black Panther’s* characters, there is a layered sense of identity, internal conflict, and uncertainty. In establishing an authentic diversity of minority representation in these films, we get legitimately complex, well-rounded minority characters of depth, and the producers of *Black Panther* undermine the representational issues that come with earlier entries in the MCU and American cinema at large, avoiding simplistic, regressive methods of representation. *Black Panther* allows its characters to just be

characters. Complex, human, and representatives of minority cultures long relegated to the margins, all depicted with their own developed sense of identity and agency. By creating stories that actively avoid utilizing minority representation as a gimmick and are concerned more with creating an intentionally complex story about and with Black and Latinx people instead of using them as cultural props, the Black Panther films create a successful space of viable minority representation.

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