

Black Panther: Identity, Afrofuturism, and Representation of Superheroes

Tisna Prabasmoro^{1*}, Rasmus Budhyono¹ and Teddi Muhtadin²

¹*English Studies Programme, Department of Literature and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung 45363, Indonesia*

²*Sundanese Studies Programme, Department of Literature and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung 45363, Indonesia*

ABSTRACT

Representation in the media is a constant source of controversy. It shows in the fact that even though the number of superheroes appearing on network and cable television is growing, leading roles of non-white, particularly black superheroes in mainstream movies remain scanty. Though movies and culture have been postulated to have a powerful influence on how non-white viewers are perceived and how they perceive themselves, non-white characters have been severely under-represented. In the Academy Awards, nominees are often dominated by white actors and cinematographers. The article is to show how black superheroes are depicted in movies. In particular, the significance of this article is that it sheds light on the ways in which Black Panther, an African superhero, and Afrofuturism are represented in the film. It examines issues of underrepresentation and symbolic annihilation and their impacts to viewers. The article eventually argues that

the increasingly diverse world is thirsty for non-white superheroes like Black Panther. Viewers deserve a superhero they can relate to from stories from their own past so that they can celebrate their historical progress and achievements and have a feeling of self-respect and dignity.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 29 June 2019

Accepted: 6 September 2019

Published: 18 December 2019

E-mail addresses:

tisna.prabasmoro@unpad.ac.id (Tisna Prabasmoro)

rasmus.budhyono@unpad.ac.id (Rasmus Budhyono)

teddi.muhtadin@unpad.ac.id (Teddi Muhtadin)

*Corresponding author

Keywords: Afrofuturism, black panther, representation, superheroes, symbolic annihilation

INTRODUCTION

In America, where they are scarcely recognized for their remarkable accomplishments, except in sports and music entertainment, Afro-Americans, especially the younger children, often turn to another course to excite their imagination. History has shown that for hundreds of years, Afro-Americans have been subjected to discrimination and inequality. Discrimination is not only a real-life issue. It is also a recurrent issue raised in comics, cartoons, advertisements, television shows, and films. This issue could actually provide immense potentials to weave imaginative narratives, offering various interesting ways to expose the potentials and achievements of Afro-Americans and convey certain social and political messages to the audience. This article is concerned with the representation of minority groups in the media.

The media is one of the most effective means of expanding knowledge and understanding. Through TV shows, radio broadcasts, and films, for example, messages are transmitted, relayed, and repeated to the entire world. McQuail (1987) as cited in Akter (2015) classified the social functions of media: “information, correlations, continuity, entertainment, and mobilization”. With these five functions, the media can play their role in managing integration, coordination, control, stability, mobilization, tension, thoughts, values, discipline, and conformity (Moradi et al., 2012). However, despite their ideal function to “[extend] the rights of individuals and groups” (Klaus, 2009), not all mass media

consistently put this into practice. Some information presented in the media tends to drive public opinion, which can eventually spur power relations among the existing social groups (Curran, 2012). Viewing representation and symbolic annihilation as important concepts, this article explores it as the basis for discussing the phenomenon of marginalization of minority groups in the media.

Furthermore, as Rollins (2018) and White et al. (2017) confirmed, intense childhood exposure to superhero characters from comics and films can have certain effects on their development. Children read and see how their favorite characters deal with and overcome problems. Scenes in which superhero characters daringly endeavor to come to the rescue and save the day are a type of exposure that serves as some kind of ‘common ground’ that prompt children to identify themselves with superhero characters. In real life at home, in the neighborhood, or at school, children see and are faced with real problems which they have to deal with. A number of studies have shown the partial, negative side of superhero films for children (Coyne et al., 2017; Jensen, 2010). However, some others have also proven otherwise—see among others: Johnston (1987), Pena et al. (1987), Rollins (2018), and White (2017). According to Pena et al. (1987), for example, what is more important to consider is the fact that basically humans start to develop their critical personality and attempt to develop their autonomous awareness and self-perception at an early age. For

children to be adequately and harmlessly exposed to superhero characters, they need to be accompanied by a parent or an adult guardian who understands movie ratings/classification for the duration of the film so that the adult can filter the messages, explain or skip scenes with classified materials in order to minimize aggressive behavior outcomes. And exposure to all that is good would be a bit of a problem if children have hardly any or no access at all to comics, books, and films that feature Afro-American superheroes.

Earlier studies on the representation of and films about superheroes still mostly focus on white superhero characters. Most studies are still heavily inclined to show that 'the great American pop culture' belongs to white scriptwriters, directors, and white superhero actors and actresses (Dyson, 1997; Gordon, 2016; Hutchison, 1996; Klock, 2002; Loeb et al., 1999). Some studies, though, have focused on black superheroes in films that do not use their names as their titles, with *Hancock* (Goldsman et al., 2008), *Black Dynamite* (Steingart et al., 2009) and *Blade* (Frankfurt et al., 1998) as exceptions. Other black superheroes that have been studied are not the main characters but white superheroes' sidekicks.

Black Panther is the name of a black superhero from Africa. He first appeared in a mainstream American comic and he eventually appeared in a Marvel Studios film with his own name as the title. This article chooses the film *Black Panther* (Feige & Coogler, 2018) as its focus not only because

it is the first black superhero film produced by Marvel Studios, but also because the film raises the issue of power and media representation. While other films depict how domination is structured, *Black Panther* does the opposite. It challenges the general view that superheroes must be white males.

To show that the playing field of the article is multi-layered, and the issue is not so 'black and white', the discussion of the article is not merely going to prove that black leading stars have been substantially uncast in the movie industry. Nor is the article going to show symptoms of Hollywood's and Disney's failure when it comes to giving leading roles to actors of color. The article acknowledges that film industries in general create situations in which their non-white audience see some of their best actors in the movies. It should also be noted though that the discussion on *Black Panther* in this article does not necessarily represent the specifically under-represented Afro-American superheroes. It is generally intended for non-white, and especially black, superheroes so that they can use *Black Panther* to depict an imagined world through fiction and fantasy.

Overall, this article attempts to underline why *Black Panther* is an important film for minority groups, particularly black audience in America. Beginning the discussion by highlighting some points about the media, which have dominantly promoted negative stereotyping of black people, the article will then explore how symbolic annihilation in the media has resulted in the fact that black people have been underrepresented

in the media. In particular, the article also discusses the concepts of representation and afrofuturism and their significance in *Black Panther*.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article used a qualitative approach on the bases of the above-mentioned research objectives and the fact that the whole analysis tried to explain the nature and context of a phenomenon. The subject of the research comprised the film *Black Panther* itself a text and the explicit and implicit meanings that it conveyed. The object of the research was the issue of representation, racial identity, and afrofuturism in the film. It was impossible to analyze the film without first watching it a number of times. Certain scenes needed to be repeated in order to observe not only the dialogs but also the various visual and non-verbal aspects that might have been overlooked. Data were collected by scrutinizing all the dialogs and deciphering verbal and non-verbal signs in the film. The results of the observation were put into a note.

The research also involved a descriptive method which aimed to describe both its subject and object based on the facts found and findings of previous studies. The discussion was informed by the concept of symbolic annihilation proposed by Gerbner and Gross (1976), Philogène (2004), Atkinson (2009), Derman-Sparks et al. (1980), Fujioka (2005), Brown (2001), and Foster (2005). Mass media articles pertaining to movie industry and its serious race problem by Carroll (2016), Harwell

(2016), and Seymour (2016) were also considered. The part discussing about the maintenance of power-related status quo by promoting and perpetuating the cultural practice of whitewashing was informed by Lehti (2016), Smith et al. (2016), and Vogel (2018). The discussion was also based on the concept of representation of Afrofuturism elaborated by Dery (1994), Sowell (1976), and Womack (2013), which was further linked to the concept of black people's representation in the media and ethnic diversity as social issues discussed by Chattoo (2018), Mapp (2008), Holte (1984), "Black Actors" (2005), Staples and Jones (1985), Terry (2018), Bondebjerg's (2012), Gross' (2001), and Kaplan's (2002) views on the lack of media representation of black people and its impacts.

Taking into account the concepts not only help sharpen the analysis, but also balances it because the concepts provide deeper insight to the study of a subculture and give access to the otherwise unheard voices. The concepts also enable better exploration of black superhero characters. It can eventually be argued that a work of art, in this case a film entitled *Black Panther*, can be an endeavor to not only voice previously silenced or unarticulated voices, but also resist the notion and practice of symbolic annihilation and/or white cultural dominance in the media.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Black Panther is a film adapted from a Marvel Comics series of the same name. Created by two comic legends Jack Kirby

and Stan Lee, the superhero first appeared in Marvel's *Fantastic Four* series number 52 in July 1966 (Nama, 2011). Director Ryan Coogler and producer Kevin Feige adapted the *Black Panther* comic series into a cinema movie. Produced by Marvel Studios, *Black Panther* tells the story about T'Challa, son of Wakanda King and Queen T'Chaka and Ramonda. T'Challa is expected to replace his late father, succeeding the throne and continuing the hereditary Black Panther legacy. In the 134-minute movie, Black Panther has to fight against his cousin Erik Killmonger (born N'Jadaka) who intends to lead a worldwide revolution, plans to seize the throne from T'Challa, and control Wakanda's resources of vibranium, the extraterrestrial metallic material used to develop the kingdom's advanced technology and weaponry. *Black Panther* is laden with social and political messages that construct and turn Africa as the most important region in the Marvel's world. With *Black Panther*, afrofuturism is a philosophical concept brought to life by a man like Ryan Coogler. In the following section, the discussion shall focus on the issues of Afrofuturism, symbolic annihilation, and the lack of representation of black people in the media.

Symbolic Annihilation, Superhero, and Racial Identity

On the concept of symbolic annihilation, Gerbner and Gross (1976) commented that "Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation." Non-representation in fiction results from symbolic annihilation.

Further elaboration on the concept of symbolic annihilation developed by scholars in the context of representation of racial, ethnic, and women groups is needed to deepen understanding of how a black character is represented cinematographically in America's movie industry. The next section of this article discusses how the concept is used to analyze the impacts of symbolic annihilation. Before that, however, it is interesting to note how symbolic annihilation is reflected in Oscar statistics.

While it is impossible to list every black actor and actress, it should importantly be affirmed first that there have been a number of leading actors of color who are consistently in the limelight as entertaining, intelligent, bold, professionally successful, or witty characters on cinema around the world. To name a few, respected and world-renowned black actors and actresses like Whoopi Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey, Will Smith, Denzel Washington, Jamie Foxx, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, Queen Latifah, Forest Whitaker, and Samuel L. Jackson have made significant contributions to changing racial attitudes and the use of stereotypes in cinema. It can be seen in all their glory that they set out a new image for black actors and actress and establish their cultural identity, and even some have won the Academy or been Oscar nominated for their roles. Be that as it may, facts and figures related to nominations and awards for black actors and actresses still leave a niggling feeling of dissatisfaction. In the 77-year history of the Academy Awards, blacks were only 3.2% of all nominees for

acting awards (“Black Actors”, 2005). In addition, only 35 Oscars were awarded to black artists out of more than 2,900 winners in the Academy’s 87-year history. While 95% of nominations went out to white film stars, less than 4% of the acting awards were given to African Americans (Syed, 2016). Concerns resulting from stagnation, if not decline, related to the statistics of black artists receiving awards can be traced back to the following years, when not even a single black star was nominated or awarded in the most prestigious event in the film industry. These concerns may have been rooted in the fact that nearly 94% of Oscar voters were white (Carroll, 2016; Mapp, 2008).

The view that only very few nominations and awards have been given to black artists has stirred up some controversies in the film industry. However, the voting members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) seem to keep this status quo. Thriving since 1915, such a practice is known as whitewashing: the act of choosing a white actor to play the role of non-white characters (Bachelier, 2018). Today, the term whitewashing can also refer to the practice of favoring white over black actors, directors, and cinematographers in an award-giving event as prestigious as the Academy Awards (Lehti, 2016; Vogel, 2018). This phenomenon is validated in a study by Smith et al. (2016), which confirms that of the total of 4,024 characters that could be evaluated for apparent race/ ethnicity across the 100 top films of 2014, 73.1% were white and 12.5% were black (Smith et al., 2016).

These findings highlight a reality that black actors do not lack talent but opportunity to win Oscars. The practice that has denied and annihilate black actors has given rise to viral public criticism and (social) media coverage under the umbrella hashtags of #OscarSoWhite and #HollywoodSoWhite, causing people to call for Oscar (Chattoo, 2018; Harwell, 2016; Seymour, 2016).

A quick glimpse at the names of superheroes ever created would confirm that lack of representation is there. As an illustration that all can agree, Superman has appeared at least 10 self-titled movies 1948 (Hughes, 2018; Kozlovic, 2016). In comparison, since introduced in 1996, it was only in 2018 that *Black Panther* appeared in a self-titled film. This again indicates that symbolic annihilation is evident and has been practiced for long. Enriching Gerbner and Gross (1976), Merskin (1998) defined symbolic annihilation as “the way cultural production and media representation ignore, exclude, marginalize, or trivialize a particular group.” The timeline of superhero appearances in Hollywood movies indicates that symbolic annihilation marginalizes black people’s (works, ability, and even existence). In other words, symbolic annihilation of black superhero characters, which can be traced back easily, is deleterious to those who are marginalized.

The lack of black superhero appearances in comics, television series, and films—particularly compared to the much more frequent appearances of white characters—has given rise to a number of important criticisms. Some of these criticisms center

on the issue of racial identity anxiety over the small number of black superheroes, which can have a certain effect on both black and white children. The more frequently white superheroes appear in theaters, the more white people's stories are narrated through the perspective of white cinematographers. Given such a reality groups of young people watch these films and grow up without being able to identify themselves with any superheroes that represent them. For these young people, this imbalance in representation restricts their dreams and ambition, making them doubtful and anxious about their identity. Like young girls, non-white children can hardly imagine becoming superheroes themselves. With the media continuously marginalizing minority characters and thus consistently representing majority characters, children are shaped by the dominant white movie industry. They chase whatever dream they can build from what they see in order to free themselves from doubts and anxieties related to their identity.

Apropos the issue of children and symbolic annihilation in the media, through her study, Philogène (2004) showed that children preferred light-skinned (white or yellow) dolls to dark-colored (black) character dolls. Dark-skinned dolls are associated with negative traits. This kind of racial knowledge and decision cannot possibly develop naturally without exposure or transmission from the media and the people around them. White children who are exposed to such a racial perspective tend to identify themselves based on the

differences they see between them and the people who look different from them. This observation from the reality they see may raise questions of which readily available, yet unbiased answers could most of the time not be found. At this point, they may start to realize both the importance and sensitivity of their questions. This realization is then validated by the media, whose role is strong in representing majority groups, and by the acts and speech acts of adult white people towards people of minority groups, including black people. As for black children, they grow up witnessing that blackness is often associated with negative traits. This can mean two things: first, that they have become an object of negative labelling and second, that they need more positive images of blackness that can overcome their sense of inferiority and self-esteem (Atkinson, 2009; Derman-Sparks et al., 1980; Fujioka, 2005).

Discussions and findings related to the lack of black superheroes imply a strong need for black children and adults to have more black superheroes. In the Hollywood film industry, whose notorious promises of justice and equality in a multiracial society are seldom fulfilled, images of black superheroes are needed amidst the confusion among black people, to whom having a black superhero is a luxury. The issue of racial preference as discussed by Philogène (2004) is also a proof that racial difference and segregation play a significant role in developing the sense of inferiority among black children. The overwhelming number of white superheroes causes people,

particularly black children, to accept the assumption of racial hegemony and white superiority as an accepted truth (Brown, 2001; Foster, 2005). *Black Panther* (Feige & Coogler, 2018) can serve as an antidote to counter against the confusing anxiety and symbolic annihilation, which itself is a reflection of the value/power constructed and promoted by the dominant group.

Representation, Afrofuturism, and *Wakanda Forever*

During the early days of the Hollywood film industry, black actors played minor roles as servants, and petty criminals. Furthermore, “Even when black characters appeared in serious film roles, the parts were often played by white actors in blackface” (“Black Actors”, 2005). The next phase of the industry witnessed black actors playing leading roles as kingpins, drug dealers, pimps, and other roles that helped strengthen the prevailing ‘negative stereotypes’ of black people in general, causing them to be viewed in condescending ways (Holte, 1984; Staples & Jones, 1985; Terry, 2018). It is apparent from the two illustrations above that the Hollywood film industry has been shaded with symbolic annihilation and that it took very long until black people can finally see a black superhero in theaters around the world. The discussion shall continue with some elaborations on the concepts of representation and afrofuturism and their significance in the film *Black Panther*.

As Gerbner and Gross (1976) argued, “Representation in the world of television gives an idea, a cause, a group its sense of

public identity, importance, and relevance”, adding that with regard to the relation between television shows and human behavior, the environment that sustained the most distinctive aspects of human existence was the environment of symbols. Humans learn, share, and act upon meanings derived from that environment. As media, television—like newspaper, radio, and theater—is likely to remain for a long time the chief source of repetitive and ritualized symbol systems cultivating the common consciousness of the most far-flung and heterogeneous mass publics in history. Since the media are common means of mass communication, they are often used to promote standard or generally accepted roles and behaviors. Film as a medium of mass communication can be defined as “a powerful medium for the visual representation of the past and for putting historical themes and questions of memory and history on the individual and collective public agenda” (Bondebjerg, 2012).

Bondebjerg’s definition above implies that like a social environment, the visual narrative in a film exerts a strong influence because film is an effective vehicle for conveying ideas and emotions related to the historical questions, hopes, expectations, dreams, failures, successes of a group of people. Bondebjerg (2012) argued that “we always react to films by bringing our real experiences and emotions with us... We bring our reality with us to the cinema, so even though we know that this is film and fiction, the ‘reality-test’ stays important.” While fictions cannot be used to validate

reality, they “offer models or simulations of the social world via abstraction, simplification, and compression” (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Thus, positive representation of a social group in films and the cause-and-effect relations portrayed in film narratives can contribute to the construction of identity and a sense of confidence.

There are two important points that should not be overlooked in *Black Panther*. First, when the idea of diversity—in reality or repetitive fiction—is often considered as a threat that needs preventive action rather than as a reality that must be accepted, *Black Panther* challenges the thought and belief that superheroes must be white males. Before *Black Panther*—except Stephen Norrington, who directed *Blade* (Frankfurt et al., 1998)—superhero film makers presented black superheroes only as white superheroes’ sidekicks or members of a league of superheroes. Before *Blade*, Peter Berg had directed *Hancock* (Goldsman et al., 2008), a film about a black superhero who, like all white superheroes, also had his own super power. However, Hancock (played by the accomplished black actor Will Smith), is characterized as a reckless alcoholic whose supposedly heroic actions often enrage Los Angeles people and cause material damage and losses, making him an object of public censure and ridicule. If this were not enough, Hancock is also an amnesiac who cannot even remember his own identity. Hancock is not a self-reliant character who uses his super power to save the day just like what a superhero is supposed to do. Rather, he is portrayed as

being too dependent on Ray Embrey (Jason Bateman) a white character who balances Hancock’s weaknesses and improves his personality and image. In short, *Hancock* on the one hand features a black actor who plays a leading superhero role. Yet, on the other hand, the superhero is always shadowed by a white character who is not a superhero.

In *Black Panther* the superhero has neither sidekick nor any one on whom he depends a lot. In his first movie appearance (*Captain America: Civil War*, 2016)—T’Challa/ Black Panther fills in a subplot to introduce Wakanda Kingdom and King T’Chaka. But in *Black Panther*, director Ryan Coogler presents a narrative in which T’Challa is given much more details. He is portrayed not only as a respected king, but also as a modern superhero who has a highly skillful mastery of the martial art and wears a superhero suit with a black mask made of an extraterrestrial metal material called vibranium. In addition, the film also reveals the secret behind Black Panther’s super power, the heart-shaped super herb that only grows in Wakanda: “Heart-Shaped Herb... a plant that granted him superhuman strength, speed and instincts.... It gives whoever takes it heightened abilities. It’s what made T’Challa so strong” (Feige & Coogler, 2018). In Wakanda’s tradition, the Heart-Shaped Herb can only be used by the king and his successor. To become a Black Panther, a new king must first ingest the herb, which then enhances his physical power and abilities and enables him to enter a state in which his soul can

transcend and commune with his ancestors. The appearance of Black Panther as a black superhero is not a common thing given the reality that the superheroes appearing in comics, books, television series, and films are always white.

Black Panther is not only about a black actor acting the role of a superhero. The film has also become a source of pride for Afro-Americans because most of the cast are black actors from Africa and North and South America. Also importantly, the idea of producing *Black Panther* was initiated by a young black writer-director. Ryan Coogler is an African-American writer and director from Oakland, America; T'Challa/Black Panther star Chadwick Boseman is a black actor, producer, and writer from South Carolina, America; and Michael B. Jordan, acting as Erik Killmonger, is a black producer and director from Carolina, America (Carter, 2018; Kuruvilla, 2018). A longer list of other important cast members includes actors and actresses from South Africa (T'Chaka/ John Kani), Kenya (Nakia/ Lupita Nyong'o), Zimbabwe (Okoye/ Danai Gurira), Guyana (Shuri/ Letitia Wright), Trinidad, Uganda, and Ivory Coast (Akingbade, 2018; Mbugua, 2018). With this many black artists playing in the film, it is very unlikely that black audiences would fail to notice their representation in *Black Panther*.

When a group of people see a little or no representation of themselves in the media, the message they would likely get would likely be that they belong to an unimportant or invisible group or that

there must be something wrong with them. Such a powerful representation as found in *Black Panther* can repudiate erroneous assumptions or messages about self.

On representation, Gross (2001) argued that “when previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interest of those powerful people who define the public agenda.” It is therefore important for Afro-American actors to play the roles as lawyers, doctors, superheroes, gods, and even God, like Morgan Freeman in *Bruce Almighty* (Shadyac, 2003). Black actors may play the role of a character with a positive image in a film. Certainly, this would not guarantee that in reality people would also accept them positively as a person. However, at least, the level of ability, skill, and acumen shown by the characters they play, though imaginative and speculative yet proportionally reasonable at the same time, especially when it is validated by an Oscar award, for example, would help prevent the actors' right to be treated equally in the real life as a citizen from being ignored or violated. In this context, characters like Black Panther and the binding situations presented in the plot becomes important because the more often viewers—regardless their skin color—are exposed to them, the more accumulated will be the effect of what they see, and the more they would perceive what they see as something normal, accepted, familiar, and thus not absurd.

Concerning the representation “of people, of cultures, of events, and ultimately

of history and of memory” (Kaplan, 2002), what people have seen becomes part of their memory, and this memory becomes part of their knowledge and life experience. Representation and memory are two important sources of power that can be practiced immediately or negotiated. The narrative of a film can affect how people live their life, how they see other people, and how they see themselves. A white child who has watched *Black Panther*, for example, may want to wear a Black Panther costume because he/she thinks that there is no difference between Black Panther and Captain America.

Another point that should not be ignored in *Black Panther* is that the conflict does not arise from the issue of misery, poverty, poor education, famine, unemployment, or other social problems often associated with the life of black people. *Black Panther* offers a narrative about rich natural resources, order, and the super power of a kingdom nation called Wakanda. The fictional Wakanda kingdom lies in Sub-Sahara Africa. It is a very advanced country rich in vibranium. The material contained in the meteorite had been deposited before it was finally discovered. The Wakanda people have developed advanced technology, but, in order to protect their vibranium resources, they have to conceal their scientific and technical achievements from the world. Its location at the center of the surrounding mountains and dense forests makes it easier for the country to remain concealed from the world. From the outside world, Wakanda looks like a poor, third-world country. Feige

and Coogler (2018) described Wakanda as ‘one of the poorest countries in the world, fortified by mountain ranges and an impenetrable rainforest. Wakanda does not engage in international trade or accept aid.’

Wakanda is not like what the outside world knows and what is told in American history books on slavery. As commonly written in history books, the dark history of black people in America began centuries ago when trans-Atlantic slave trade began from Africa to European countries (Morgan, 2000). During the long history of slave trade, African people were captured and sold as slaves. They suffered from mental and physical oppression of ruthless white slave owners and traders. *Black Panther* takes African-American viewers on a journey to Wakanda, a place in Africa where black people are the center of their own narrative. In Wakanda the people live a sovereign, independent, and happy life. They are not slaves and do not have to serve white people. By watching *Black Panther*, black people can imagine themselves as people who are free from racial profiling, negative stereotyping, and racial prejudices. It does not need any license or permit from anyone or any institution to celebrate Wakanda because no other people can understand oppression better than those who have been and are always oppressed.

Wakanda is also a depiction of afrofuturism, a concept of future life which is artistically rich, scientifically and technologically progressive, imagined and brought to reality by black artists in their work. Dery (1994) described afrofuturism

as follows: “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.” Based on this definition, what makes Afrofuturism different from science fiction is that it is not just about any group. It has to be about the tradition and identity of African people and African diaspora across the globe. It is not enough for a narrative about black people to be called afrofuturistic. To pass for an afrofuturistic work, a narrative must present culturally rooted characters, characters who would not hesitate to celebrate anything that is uniquely in which the black culture is reinvented. In *Black Panther*, T’Challa is not just an ordinary black character. T’Challa is a king who can defend his honor in his conflict with N’Jadaka, and a leader of a rich nation that needs no international aids and that would not lose anything were it to develop the world—which is also inhabited by white people—with vibranium which makes Wakanda a self-determining country. The exploration of Afrofuturism in *Black Panther* is the creation of Wakanda, a utopian world in which white people are not excluded and are treated equally, a feature frequently absent in sci-fi movies by white producers/directors.

Departing from Dery’s (1994) concept of afrofuturism, Womack (2013) explained further that “Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic esthetic and a

framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs.” Based on Womack’s definition, afrofuturism refers to the cultural aesthetic that combines science fiction, history, and fantasy with the aim of exploring African-American experiences and creating among African-American people a sense that they are connected to their distant relatives all over the world and to the long forgotten African origin, from which they had been uprooted. Considering black people’s history and what they are experiencing today, it is not surprising that afrofuturistic works not only present an imagined world through fiction and fantasy, but also challenge and resist the injustice of the world in which they live. T’Challa inspires black audiences to look into themselves as a narrative center, a source of a great power to navigate through all possibilities, to support one another as a community, and to foster a culture and world in a just and balanced manner. As an Afrofuturistic place, Wakanda goes beyond the imagination and expectation of white people. Wakanda is not only about black people still existing in the future. It is also about an imagination that with the technology they have mastered, they will win the future. Wakanda is a dream nation where black people can really feel how it feels like to be living in their own home. Wakanda is an ideal place that their ancestors had dreamed of in the days when they were still chained and manacled.

Since its release, *Black Panther*; viewers all around the world have created, done, and popularize the ‘Wakanda Forever Salute’, a gesture of respect shown by making an ‘X’ with both arms across the chest. This salute is performed to celebrate the *Black Panther*’s victory, spread the eminence of the black superhero, and recognition of ‘black excellence’ (Frederickson, 1987; Sowell, 1976) in various contexts and situations.

CONCLUSION

With the media continuing to bombardier public opinion and perpetuate the notion of white supremacy and black inferiority, *Black Panther* appears not as a black sidekick, but as a black character who challenges the long-standing status quo that all superheroes must be male and white. *Black Panther* represents forgotten black superheroes like the often forgotten Blade – the black vampire hunters, or the rarely mentioned Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, a Starfleet communications officer from the television series *Star Trek*. Representing scores of colored actress and actresses, *Black Panther* is a proof a dynamic progress. It symbolizes an evolvement in the roles of black characters in fiction. It ends the status quo which has for long portrayed black people as servants or as lower-class characters. *Black Panther*’s appearance in a self-titled superhero film sends a message that non-white citizens are also an important social group. *Black Panther* is not a story about physical and mental oppression, material poverty, poor education, hunger,

and unemployment. *Black Panther* portrays Wakanda as a utopian place that black people had been dreaming of since the days when they were still traded as slaves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was partially supported by Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran. We thank our colleagues from Department of Literature and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran who provided insight and expertise that greatly assisted the research. We would also like to show our gratitude to the two “anonymous” reviewers for their comments that greatly improved the manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Akingbade, T. (2018, February 17). The cast of *Black Panther* are connected in ways you didn’t even know about. *Metro*. Retrieved January 4, 2019, from <https://metro.co.uk/2018/02/17/cast-black-panther-connected-ways-didnt-even-know-7320304/>
- Akter, T. (2015). Resistance and media : “Toma ” as a metaphor of power relations and its representation in Northern Cyprus Print Media. *International Conference on Communication, Media, Technology and Design*, (May), 355-367. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/38616789/Toma.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1552463620&Signature=r1MSqsROOsDi5MNS1XBFNAo5kNA%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3Bfilename%3DResistance_and_Media_Toma_As_a_Metaphor.pdf

- Atkinson, S. (2009). Adults constructing the young child, "race," and racism. In G. Mac Naughton & K. Davis (Eds.), *"Race" and early childhood education* (pp. 139). New York, USA: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230623750_9
- Bachelier, S. (2018). Hidden history: The whitewashing of the 1917 East St Louis Riot. *The Confluence*, 9(16), 16-25. Retrieved December 24, 2018, from <https://www.lindenwood.edu/files/resources/the-confluence-fall-winter-2017-2018-bachelier.pdf>
- Black Actors have a banner year at the 2005 Academy Awards. (2005). *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, (47), 36-36. Retrieved December 14, 2018, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25073164>
- Bondebjerg, I. (2012). Confronting the past: Trauma, history and memory in Wajda's film. *Images*, XI(20), 38. Retrieved January 4, 2019, from [https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/bitstream/10593/7060/1/Ib_Bondebjerg - Confronting the Past. Trauma%2C History and Memory in Wajda%27s film.pdf](https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/bitstream/10593/7060/1/Ib_Bondebjerg_-_Confronting_the_Past_Trauma%2C_History_and_Memory_in_Wajda%27s_film.pdf)
- Brown, J. A. (2001). *Black superheroes, milestone comics, and their fans*. Oxford, USA: Univ. Press of Mississippi.
- Carroll, R. (2016, January 20). Oscars "unlikely to change" despite race protest, insiders suggest. *The Guardian*. Retrieved January 4, 2019, from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/20/academy-awards-black-actor-nominations-oscars-unlikely-to-change-insiders-suggest>
- Carter, C. (2018, February 23). Black Panther's Ryan Coogler: From doctor to Hollywood director. *Blackdoctor*. Retrieved January 4, 2019, from <https://blackdoctor.org/520086/ryan-coogler-from-doctor-to-hollywood-director/2/>
- Chattoo, C. B. (2018). Oscars so white: Gender, racial, and ethnic diversity and social issues in us documentary films (2008-2017). *Mass Communication and Society*, 21(3), 368-394. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2017.140935>
- Coyne, S. M., Nelson, D. A., Essig, L. W., Linder, J. R., Stockdale, L., & Collier, K. M. (2017). Pow! Boom! Kablam! Effects of viewing superhero programs on aggressive, prosocial, and defending behaviors in preschool children. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 45(8), 1523-1535. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-016-0253-6>
- Curran, J. (2012). *Media and power*. London, England: Routledge.
- Derman-Sparks, L., Higa, C. T., & Sparks, B. (1980). Children, race and racism: How race awareness develops. *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, 11(3), 1-21. Retrieved January 4, 2019, from <http://www.intergroupresources.com/rc/children,race,and,racism.pdf>
- Dery, M. (1994). "Black to the future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." In M. Dery (Ed.), *Flame Wars: A discourse of cyberculture*. Durham, England: Duke University Press. Retrieved December 16, 2018, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278667733_Black_to_the_Future_Interviews_with_Samuel_R_Delany_Greg_Tate_and_Trícia_Rose_FLAME_WARS_THE_DISCOURSE_OF_CYBERCULTURE
- Dyson, A. H. (1997). *Writing superheroes: Contemporary childhood, popular culture, and classroom literacy*. New York, USA: Teachers College Press.
- Feige, K. (Producer), & Coogler, R. (Director). (2018). *Black Panther* [Motion Picture]. USA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.
- Foster, W. H. (2005). *Looking for a face like mine*. Waterbury, USA: Fine Tooth Press LLC.
- Frankfurt, P., Engelman, R., Snipes, W. (Producer), & Norrington, S. (Director). (1998). *Blade* [Motion Picture]. USA: New Line Cinema.

- Frederickson, G. M. (1987). *The Black image in the white mind: The debate on Afro-American character and destiny, 1817-1914*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Fujioka, Y. (2005). Black media images as a perceived threat to African American ethnic identity: Coping responses, perceived public perception, and attitudes. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 49(4), 450-467. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4904_6
- Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of Communication*, 26(2), 172-199. Retrieved December 13, 2018, from https://fsw.vu.nl/nl/Images/Literatuur_MatchingCW-GerbnerGross1976_Living_with_television_tcm249-831438.pdf
- Goldsman, A., Lassiter, J., Mann, M., & Smith, W. (Producer), & Berg, P. (Director). (2008). *Hancock* [Motion Picture]. USA: Columbia Pictures.
- Gordon, I. (2016). Refiguring media: Tee shirts as a site of audience engagement with superheroes. *The Information Society*, 32(5), 326-332. Retrieved December 23, 2018, from <https://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/>

