

Opinion: "Black Panther" redefines and expands the narrative of superheroes

By Brandon T. Harden, Philadelphia Inquirer, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.12.18

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Chadwick Boseman in the film "Black Panther." Photo by: Matt Kennedy/Marvel Studios

In my 6-year-old mind, being a superhero was life. At every free moment, I draped towels across my back to form capes and created masks out of colorful construction paper.

As much as I loved and believed in the fantasy of heroism, I felt inadequate because the (s)heroes that appeared in the movies and on television never looked like me. I didn't believe that stories about people of color could be fantastical — that we could live in different worlds, and fly, and have super strength.

We didn't do stuff like that.

For decades, superheroes like Batman and Wonder Woman have become archetypes of honor, courage, and bravery that in many ways have helped shape American culture. And for decades, blackness has been underrepresented, not only in Hollywood but notoriously in the superhero/sci-fi/fantasy genre. Now, after 17 films since the Marvel Cinematic Universe began, “Black Panther” will redefine and expand the narrative of superheroes. It does so by placing the fate of the world in the hands of a black man.

The idea of a black superhero is appealing to quite a lot of people — even though the movie won’t officially hit theaters until February 16, “Black Panther” has already set a record for most advance tickets sold in the Marvel Universe, according to Fandango, beating previous titleholder “Captain America: Civil War.”

Few Black Superheroes Portrayed In Films

André Carrington is an assistant professor of African-American literature at Drexel University. “Sadly,” he said, “I do think that we [the black community] are excluded from the main stage where the public, including most black people, see superheroes and stories of extraordinary things in general.” Carrington said people maintain preconceived notions “about what black people are interested in” and how they react to storytelling in films. “Those things really keep us from doing the work to get our stories told to bigger audiences,” he said.

Although there have been a few black characters in sci-fi or fantasy films, such as X-Men’s Storm, most notably played by Halle Berry, they usually have supporting roles. Those characters usually don’t have any background or depth.

I began to resent superhero films, although I told myself I was aging out of them as an excuse. The resentment lasted until I came across the trailer for the Ryan Coogler-directed “Black Panther.”

The Storyline Of The "Black Panther"

In “Black Panther,” T’Challa, played by Chadwick Boseman returns home to the fictional African nation of Wakanda to take his rightful place as king. Upon arriving, he finds his throne and legacy in jeopardy. In order to defeat a longtime enemy, played by Michael B. Jordan, and preserve the kingdom and the safety of the world, T’Challa must harness the full power of the Black Panther, the leader of the panther tribe.

Finally, a story of a black hero with African roots is being told. While “Black Panther” is not the only superhero that’s part of the current cultural conversation — Netflix’s “Luke Cage,” the CW’s “Black Lightning” — “Black Panther” feels bigger. It’s a part of the Marvel Universe, the comic book company and movie making studio that has generated billions of dollars.

The first look at the heart-pumping “Black Panther” trailer instantly went viral. Not only do we see a superhero from the black perspective, audiences immediately see an all-star black cast. The case includes Oscar winners Lupita Nyong’o and Forest Whitaker, Oscar nominees Angela Bassett and Daniel Kaluuya, as well as “Walking Dead” star Danai Gurira.

Philadelphia-based cultural critic and filmmaker Shantrelle P. Lewis is cannot wait for the film's release. "What's not to love about an all-black universe where black people are not only royalty but superheroes?" she said. The movie will show black people "in a way that we haven't necessarily been depicted before," she added.

Recent Black Films Have Done Well At Theaters

It’s also worth mentioning how Hollywood underestimates the power of black consumers. Hollywood has a known struggle with diversity, as the majority of the movies produced in Hollywood are made by and are about straight white people. Nonetheless, black films have recently and consistently outperformed expectations for movie sales. Movies like “Girls Trip,” “Hidden Figures,” “Get Out,” “The Best Man Holiday” and “Moonlight” prove the myth wrong that black stories aren’t sought after by mass audiences.

“Black Panther” is the type of film that’s desperately needed in today's society. People are starting to question white supremacy and conversations on inclusion have become more common. The movie has already started to transcend the silver screen by sparking discussion around the power and ingenuity of blackness. The idea of an advanced civilization where black people thrive in the absence of whiteness, in and of itself, is a bold and provocative notion.

“Black Panther,” bridges traditional African tribal culture with a modern, technologically advanced world. It belongs in the genre of Afrofuturism, a cultural movement that has ushered blackness into the exclusive white spaces of sci-fi and fantasy. "Black Panther" furthers that mission.

Film Debuts During Black History Month

Traditionally, Black History Month has been a time of appreciation and reflection of African-American culture. Every year we show reverence for the courageous figures that made it possible for people like Barack Obama and Ta-Nehisi Coates and Oprah Winfrey and Beyoncé to achieve such success and influence. This year, "Black Panther" allows us to peer into the future, to gaze at the possibility of what blackness can become.

“Black Panther” sends a message that blackness can and should be portrayed in every beautiful, complex, and dense way that it exists.

We can do stuff like this.