Black Superheroes in Media and Popular Culture

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Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku

Sveučilišni diplomski dvopredmetni studij anglistike; smjer: nastavnički

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ABSTRACT:

The aim of this thesis was to present the role of black superheroes through comic books written in 1960s and 1970s and present-day movies and television series. Furthermore, the thesis looks at the historical context since such media are a part of popular culture. In this way, they reflect the society. Through the historical context of social justice movements and demonstrations related to black people's rights in the U. S., the thesis examines black superheroes in comic books (Black Panther, Luke Cage and Black Lightning) and their adaptations (in movies and television shows). The foundations of the analysis are concepts developed by S. Hall and E. Said (*representation* and *Orientalism*), and stereotyping of black people throughout history. The selected black superhero characters were analysed through their physical appearance, personality, the people that surround them and the places they live in. The characters are considered based on the social contexts of the time when they appeared. For instance, in comic books, Luke Cage was represented as aggressive and muscular. Driven by vengeance, he returns to Harlem and uses his superpowers to establish peace through physical violence. However, in the television series, he is presented as a calm and collected person that thinks before he acts. He values culture and he expresses his emotions. The key result of this analysis is the apparent influence of the social context on the representation of black superheroes in popular culture. There are differences in the characters and there is a lack of stereotypical elements in the movie and television series, as opposed to the comic books published in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, it is important to emphasise that the influence of social changes can be seen in the adaptations of the same characters that are a part of popular culture. With seemingly same characteristics, they appeared in different social circumstances, which resulted in differences in their image.

Key words: adaptation, black superheroes, comic books, Orientalism, stereotyping

Crni super heroji u medijima i popularnoj kulturi

SAŽETAK:

Ovaj rad je za cilj imao prikazati ulogu crnih super heroja kroz stripove nastale u 1960-im i 1970-im godinama te kroz aktualne filmove i serije. Uz to, rad je problematiku stavio u povijesni kontekst budući da su ovi mediji dio popularne kulture i samim time odraz stanja društva. Konkretnije, uz povijesni kontekst pokreta i demonstracija vezanih za prava crnaca u SAD-u, pruža se prikaz crnih super heroja u stripovima (Black Panther, Luke Cage i Black Lightning) te njihovim adaptacijama (u filmovima i serijama). Temelj analize čine koncepti S. Halla i E. Saida (*representation* i *Orientalizam*), a osim njih razmatrano je i stereotipiziranje crnaca kroz povijest. Odabrani likovi crnih super heroja su analizirani kroz aspekt fizičkog izgleda, osobnosti, ljudi koji ih okružuju te okoline u kojoj žive. Likovi su stavljeni u društveni kontekst vremena u kojem su nastali pa je tako Luke Cage u stripu prikazan kao agresivan i mišićav. Vođen osvetom, vraća se u Harlem i pomoću svojih super moći, tučnjavom, uvodi red. S druge strane, on je u seriji prikazan kao osoba koja promišlja prije nego što djeluje. Njemu je važna kultura te izražava svoje emocije. Ključan rezultat ove analize je evidentan utjecaj društvenog konteksta na prikaz crnih super heroja u popularnoj kulturi. Prisutne su razlike u prikazu likova te manjak stereotipnih elemenata u filmu i serijama nastalim danas, u odnosu na stripove nastale u 1960-im i 1970-im godinama. Stoga, važno je naglasiti da se utjecaj društvenih promjena vidi u adaptacijama istih likova koji pripadaju popularnoj kulturi. S naizgled jednakim karakteristikama oni su nastali u različitim društvenim okolnostima zbog čega su prisutne razlike u njihovom prikazu.

Ključne riječi: adaptacija**,** crni super heroji, Orijentalizam, stereotipiziranje, strip

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1. Introduction

Cultural awareness in today's world is an ever-changing field. With those changes, the elements of culture are being revisited and sometimes the way the general public looks at them changes.

This can be witnessed by the recent Black Lives Matter protests that were raging across America, and later on spread all over the world (Beckett; Wolfe; BBC, "More protests held"; Kishi and Jones; Ankel; Kirby, etc.). The protests happened because a video of a black man dying while being arrested by a white police officer, who knelt on his neck, spread over the social media and news outlets, which was similar to the way the brutality against black people sparked the civil rights movement during the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. (Blankenship and Reeves; Johnson, D.). When it comes to cultural revisionism that was sparked during the protests, many of the protestors focused on calling for removal, personally removing or defacing Confederate monuments, Christopher Columbus statues, and slave owners' statues from the public squares because they claimed statues and monuments like that praised the era of suppression, slavery and discrimination against black people and gave praise to the famous slave owners and abusers (BBC, "Confederate"; Mervosh et al.; The New York Times; Abadi et al.; Dunlap; Morris).

This work aims to offer a view at a historical context of civil rights movements after the American Civil War and their connections and similarities to the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement that is claimed to be the biggest social movement in U.S. history by some (Buchanan et al.; Osei; Sinclair).

In a similar vein that is the trend during the current protests, this thesis will critically (re)consider black superheroes and their appearances in popular culture works like comic books, television series and feature length films. This work will examine the first comic book appearances of Black Panther, Luke Cage, and Black Lightning. Furthermore, those

representations will be compared to Black Panther's recently released feature length film, and Luke Cage's and Black Lightning's television series.

The guides for this critical analysis will be the works of Stuart Hall on otherness, representation and stereotyping, and Edward Said's work on orientalism and colonialism.

2. Comic Book Superheroes in the Current Popular Culture

The popularity of superhero movies cannot be denied due to the fact that almost each Marvel Studios movie released broke some box office record. When profit is considered, one of the biggest success stories of their movies is the *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), a movie that broke Lucas Films' *Avatar* (2009) record for highest grossing film globally by earning $2,797,800,564 (imdb.com, "Avengers: Endgame") to date. When it comes to successes in winning industry awards, the superhero movie that won the most Oscars to date is Marvel Studios' *Black Panther* that, among other nominations, won Oscars for Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures (Original Score), Best Achievement in Costume Design and Best Achievement in Production Design (imdb.com, "Black Panther").

The place of comic book superheroes in the current popular culture seems to be ever changing because the popularity of each superhero goes up when a movie adaptation of their comic book is released, and it goes down if no sequels come out afterward (Sim). It cannot be denied that they captivate the attention of big crowds – but is that everything it takes for something to be a part of the popular culture?

2.1. *The Criteria for Being a Part of Popular Culture*

The first and the most obvious definition of popular culture would be to claim that popular culture is the segment of culture which meets the approval of a large amount of people and is most broadly liked (Storey 5). This criterion could be discovered through investigating sales of CDs, concert tickets, movie theatre tickets, merchandise of all kinds, but this might be futile, as it is impossible to determine the criterion of where the cut-off amount of sold goods

would be for something to either be or not be included in the popular culture. The second way of looking at popular culture would be to put it against what we consider high culture and proclaim that everything that is left over is popular culture (Storey 5-6). But there are no clear distinctions between these two categories, as there are a lot of crossovers from one side to the other, and those trends are determined by the people who consume the culture (e.g. Shakespeare's works were once a part of popular culture, while his works nowadays occupy the area of high culture). If popular culture would be defined in a third way, by saying it is mass produced, widely available and heavily commercial in nature one would be saying that consumers are not thinking before "buying". This is proved to be untrue, as many new products that are highly represented through advertisement fail to meet the selling margins and result in monetary loss (Storey 6). This would make popular culture part of the "ideological machine that more or less effortlessly reproduces the prevailing structures of power" (Storey 9) and the consumers would be hopeless in their efforts to demonstrate free will. A fourth way of defining popular culture sees it as the culture that comes from "the people" (Storey 9). When considering popular culture in this way, it would be the "authentic" culture that "the people" decide to consume on their own behalf, without any outside covert influence. Fifth definition of popular culture draws on the A. Gramsci's term "hegemony", which he uses to describe the way in which powerful factions of a society try to gain compliance of inferiors (Storey 10). Here, popular culture is the product of a constant trade of "cultural items" between powerful parts of society trying to keep their position by "giving up" some of "their parts" of culture to the less powerful, and the other way around. For example, a family seaside holiday was once a part of aristocratic tradition, while nowadays middle class can also take part in it, which makes seaside holidays part of a popular culture. The debate on postmodernism is what shapes the last definition of popular culture (Storey 12). In this debate, popular culture and high culture are not two different concepts. One of the

examples are television commercials where high culture and popular culture mix and become one. Some television commercials become so popular that it is hard to make a distinction between artists owing the popularity of their songs to appearances in television commercials and popular products owing the commercial success to the audio background used in the commercial. This also makes it hard to determine if the thing being sold is the product or the song that plays in the television commercial. That is what makes the high and popular culture blend in the postmodern era (Storey 12).

The commonality among all these definitions is that popular culture is "definitely a culture that only emerged following industrialization and urbanization" (Storey 12). The former resulted in employers caring only for monetary gains, while the latter resulted in classes being separated by residential conditions. Maybe even more importantly, French Revolution made governing bodies of other countries introduce measures that ensured that radicalism was extinguished (Storey 13). The result of these three conditions was a cultural space where popular culture could sprout without influence of the classes in power.

Whichever definition of popular culture is applied, the comic books, movies, and television shows examined in this thesis are a part of it. They are broadly liked, they are not considered to be high culture, they are widely available and heavily commercial in nature (many games, toys, etc. that follow their theme and characters are sold), people identify with them in their everyday life (through changing their lifestyle or image), and they often blur the line between high culture by using imagery and other elements of it (like music).

3. The Utilisation of Representation in Communication

Since this thesis is dealing with representation that happens mostly in visual media, in expanding on the concept of representation, the focus will be on representation in the media mostly, as developed by S. Hall. Additionally, when considering the contemporary ways of communication in social media or instant messaging applications or programs, it happens

mostly visually (e.g. Adami and Jewitt 1; Russmann and Svensson 1), whether that may be using a simple emoji, a funny image, a short video in *.gif* format or a longer video of the situation that a person is trying to communicate to others.

Before going to visual representation, it is also important to mention that language is also a type of signifying practice, as much as visual imagery is (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 15). Words themselves carry a meaning, but they do not have meaning by themselves. They are appointed meaning by the speakers of a language - a system of rules which a group of people decide to use to signify reality and their surroundings. This means that words are also a representational tool which in and of itself can carry symbolic meaning, ideas and feelings the speaker has.

In that vein, representation could be defined as "an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 15). This also applies culture to language and meaning. It can involve the use of language or images to represent things. What is important for the representation to work is that people have similar conceptual maps in their minds that enable them to understand each other. This is why people with the same cultural background will have more success in understanding each other than they otherwise would and they will also interpret the signs in similar ways (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 16).

When it comes to representation (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 24): "The main point is that meaning does not inhere *in* things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a signifying practice – a practice that *produces* meaning, that *makes things mean.*"

Representation can be considered in the old view or in the new view. The old aspect of representation that Hall ("Representation and the Media" 6) emphasises is the difference between *representation* and *re*presentation. The first version has the meaning mentioned

above, while the second version (with emphasis on "re") symbolises that something was there before, and it is being *re*presented differently through the media. A new view of representation would be to consider the signifying practices in the moment they are happening, not after the fact, to consider them as part of what is being represented, not a disconnected facet.

What influences one's representation and understanding of other representations is culture (Hall, "Representation and the Media" 9). Culture is the controlling factor to how individuals make sense of things and how they assign them meanings. Without culture, individuals could not form conceptual maps and if those maps would be different than all the others (there was no overlap with other people's conceptual maps) that individual could not make sense of the world. The important factor is that culture and all the classifications individuals have within their conceptual maps are learned through life, and not imprinted in the genes (Hall, "Representation and the Media" 10).

When images and what they signify are concerned, it is also important to consider what the images do not present because in that way it is easy to discover which aspects of a culture are marked, and which are not (Hall, "Representation and the Media" 15). For example, if the news outlets were to put out a report with a title saying: "Croatian comedian held an event in Pula amphitheatre and it attracted the biggest crowd recorded for that venue", and a photo that shows the comedian is not white or male, but a black female, it would be easy to pinpoint the marked characteristics of a "Croatian comedian". The unmarked characteristics not shown by the image would be that she is white and male (those would also be called "normal" by many people), while her being black and female would be marked characteristics because they would have to be in the image, and would not be considered "normal" for what constitutes the concept of a "Croatian comedian" in this cultures' conceptual map.

Another point that has to be made about images in the newspapers, especially advertisements, is that their interpretation does not rely on them, but on the reader (Hall, "Representation and the Media" 16). The image in the advertisement has no meaning, the meaning is assigned by the spectator when they look at it and relate to the things the image shows. In this sense, one image cannot have one fixed meaning because its meaning relies on the reader. The meaning is thus contextual, it depends on the point in history when it is being observed and all the concepts the observer has in their mind – it is an interpretation (Hall, "Representation and the Media" 17). Moreover, meaning is also influenced by power relations in a certain context; power is what can "fix" an image's meaning in one point. Stereotyping is a form where power attempts to fix a meaning to one specific aspect of an image.

In this way, characters in visual media are always represented by their authors with certain marked and unmarked characteristics. The readers develop their own image of the characters based on the conceptual maps of a culture. The culture is heavily influenced by the historic context, which indirectly influences the readers' or spectators' experience.

4. The Orient Then and Now

Colonisation of the world has made some of the European nations (especially the French and the British) closely connected to the lands of the middle and far East, so much so that they are considered adjacent to them due to the fact that some of the richest and oldest colonies were located there (Said 1). This connectedness of the Western nations to the Eastern experience is what E. Said calls Orientalism, and that is where the "deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (Said 1) come from. Moreover, the role of the Orient does not stop there, as it was a place that Europe could take as antithetical when creating its definition, image, personality, and experience. In this theoretical field, the opposition to Orient is the Occident (the West) which has changed after the World War II. Colonising nations in the 19th century could be called the Occident until the WWII, when the power shifted to the U.S.

It is important to point out that Orient did not exist since the creation of Earth and nature, but it was assigned to a specific area, it is an idea that is supported "by a history, tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary" (Said 5). In other words, Orient was made by the colonists from Europe because it was them who described what they have seen there in their novels and diaries which were then distributed in the West. When the Westerners described an Oriental, they were most often reduced to universals such as their "primitive" state, primary characteristics and spiritual backgrounds. The problem these foundations of Orientalism have is that they are "nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths, which were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away" (Said 6). Worth of Orientalism does not lie in the way it depicts Orient, but in signifying the power that the West has over the Orient. Nowadays, Orientalism is reflected in the imagery that surrounds the Middle Eastern people who are often depicted as menacing, dangerous and against the West (Said 75). Additionally, in the similar fashion as was thought of Africa during colonisation, it is seen as a land where civilizational advancements are not that likely to happen and that it is inhabited by people who refuse to think that they can lead a better life. The only advantage they have over the West is the oil, which they refuse to surrender because they want to hinder West advancement. Today's Orientalism of the Arabs and Islam is comprised of four dogmas (Said 300). The first is that the West and the Orient are completely opposite to each other. On the one hand, the West is "rational, developed, humane, and superior" (Said 300), while on the other hand, the Orient is "aberrant, underdeveloped, and inferior" (Said 300). The second dogma of this Orientalism is that the generalisations that are already formed about the Orient are always preferred to the factual evidence gained from modern reality of the Orient. The following dogma is that the Orient is unable to change, it is still in time, always the same, and incapable of defining itself, which is why it needs the West to define it objectively (Said 301). The last dogma of modern Orientalism is that when the Orient is reduced to its core, it

is either something to be feared, or that it is the area that is ready to be taken over and controlled (direct occupation is welcome whenever it is possible and can be justified). This shows that there are still evident differences between the West and the "Others", and that the West is depicted as better in all areas. Additionally, this allows the West to "police" the whole world, and take control when the opportunity rises.

5. The Encounters That Marked the "Others"

In his printed work ("Representation: Cultural Representation") and in his lectures at The Open University, S. Hall states that there were three periods in which the "West" met black people, and those instances gave way to a flood of popular representations (stereotypes) that were founded on the marking of racial differences that were then encountered.

5.1. The Deterioration of the Image Europe Had of Africa

In the Middle Ages, the image of Africa and Africans was steadily changing from positive to negative and the base for that were the encounters imperial Britons had with the natives (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 238). At first, Africa was an "undiscovered" land, mysterious, but because Christians started spreading their faith early, the image that Europeans had of this "new" continent were mostly positive. As time moved on, Africans were proclaimed to be descendants of a character that was cursed in the Bible, and this is why they were believed to be primitive, dirty, and maybe most importantly, made to be servants. Additionally, during The Enlightenment, Africa was thought of as place where everything that is horrible originated from (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 239). It was a place without history, where no development has happened, inhabited by a "monkey tribe" of Negros.

Such an image held up through the 19th century, when inner Africa was being explored by European colonisers, and one could say it even worsened. Some explorers called it a fetish land filled with witch doctors and cannibals (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation"

239). During that time, the stereotypical imagery of marked racial differences was adopted into commodity advertising ("on matchboxes, needle cases, toothpaste post, pencil boxes, cigarette packets, board games, paperweights, sheet music, (…) soap boxes, biscuit tins, whisky bottles, tea tins and chocolate bars" (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 240)), which only made the spread of past stereotypical representations easier, quicker and more broad.

5.2. The White Fear of Race Mixing

The second time when racial markedness was detrimental for the image that white people had of the blacks was during the plantation slavery period. However, racialized ideology is sometimes claimed to have appeared only when slavery was condemned by Abolitionists in the 19th century (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 242). Black people were seen as less worthy because they failed to develop a civilised life in Africa, they were seen as animals, their physical differences meant that they were not able to develop the mental capacities as well as white man could, which led to the fear of race mixing and deterioration of white race after the abolition of slavery. All of these arguments were used against freeing the slaves, and this imagery spread like wildfire through anti-abolitionist propaganda. The features that the Negro had were believed to all be fixed in their nature, and could not be changed, which was witnessed by the rebellions they caused every chance they had so they could let out the buried passions and the built up need for revenge (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 244). This led to "scientific racism", which was stronger than the aforementioned Biblical racism, and that put the "culture" of whites (made to subdue the "nature" of blacks) against the "nature" of blacks (which was the same as "culture" for blacks). Likewise, the body shape was such a big factor in all the markedness because it was always visible for all to see, and provided evidence for making the racial difference a natural occurrence (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 245).

5.3. Cinema Tropes of the Early American Cinema

The third encounter of the "West" and black people was during the post-WWII migrations from "third world" to Europe and North America (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 239). The period was marked by the abolition of slavery with old imagery of blacks remaining. In the American cinema of the time, blacks were presented as lazy, primitive and simple. The stereotypes of black people that were dominating in this landscape were those of "subhuman creatures, good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language" (Bogle qtd. in Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 251). Another trope of this period is that of women who were mixed-race, attractive, sexy and caught between their races, but their part-whiteness made them acceptable to be desired by white men. Next type of black women that appeared on the big screen was that of prototypical house servants, usually large, bossy with husbands who do nothing but lay around at home while they serve the whites. Moreover, the cinema of that age was also filled with imagery of strong muscular violent black men who were savages when rage against whites took over them (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 251).

Even when the actors (such as S. Poitier and P. Robeson) and the characters they played did not conform to the commonly represented image of blacks in cinema, there were still underlying issues with the contexts they appeared in (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 254). Those contexts enabled the white and the black audiences to differently see the traits (spontaneity, naturalness and emotion) of characters they played. Additionally, to be a successful black actor, one had to adapt through assuming white norms of style, looks and behaviour (Hall, "Representation: Cultural Representation" 253). On the one hand, whites interpreted the emotion in the songs of black characters as them expressing their pain, while being civilised, through "proper" singing about their suffering (not the blues

and jazz improvisations). On the other hand, blacks liked that the same characters were still emotional and not completely indifferent (Hall, “Representation: Cultural Representation” 254).

The use of the stereotypes mentioned above in the American cinema was widespread and unchanging until the 1960s when the Civil Rights movement happened along with the extensive migrations of African-Americans from South to North’s urban centres (Hall, “Representation: Cultural Representation” 256).

6. History of the Black Power Movement After the Civil War

Post-war racial rhetoric in America was at the same time both hidden and blatantly obvious (Joseph, “The Black Power Movement” XI). It was hidden in unequal education opportunities, lower residential standards, judicial injustice and economic outcomes for black people, as opposed to whites. The racial violence towards blacks was one of the areas where the racial rhetoric was obvious. The history remembers the Watts riots as the moment the peace was disturbed by the blacks, and when the inception of “the violent, angry, and punitive rhetoric of the Black Power Movement” (Joseph, “The Black Power Movement” XI) was. Such a narrative ignores all the harsh conditions blacks found themselves in throughout American history, and equates the violence that appeared before the Watts riots in Alabama, Birmingham, Mississippi, Oxford, and Harlem, New York to anomalies, but they were also movements where blacks defended themselves and their freedoms. In this section of the present article, a brief history of the Black Power Movement will be presented as it gives an important context for the development of the characters whose analysis follows later. As it would require too much elaboration, some of the historical aspects might not be mentioned, but that does not dismiss them as less valuable or unimportant.

6.1. The Beginning

The words “Black Power” first echoed through America in 1966, when Martin Luther King Jr. led demonstrators through the state of Mississippi to protest the violence and terror whites showed (Joseph, “The Black Power Movement” 2). Though, Martin Luther King Jr. was not the one who made the words “Black Power” the slogan of the cause, it was Stokely Carmichael who called for justice with those words while being arrested for 27th time. As King was against violence, he distanced himself from that slogan, and the media took Carmichael’s new slogan as a token of “new militancy”, which Carmichael did not mind, as he slowly became a spokesperson for a whole new “generation of Black radicals” (Joseph, “The Black Power Movement” 2).

The Black Power Movement, which rose from the events in 1966, tried to reshape the connection between blacks and American society. The movement made new activists take up a combatant stance (Joseph, “The Black Power Movement” 3). The members fought fiercely for community control of public schools, introducing studies of black influence in colleges and universities, rights to gain state or government benefits, reforming prisons and seeking racial justice for the poor through demanding jobs for them. At the same time, others fought to improve the place that blacks had in the American society through conferences, community activism, organising schools detached from government control and strategically utilising electoral policies.

While this era raised hope among those who fought for black power and equality, situation took a turn for the worse as the assassination of King and the election of Richard Nixon symbolised that the battle for black rights was far from over (Joseph, “The Black Power Movement” 4).

6.2. The Inception of the Black Panther Party

Oakland was one of the cities that saw a significant increase in the amount of black population during the migration from southern to northern parts of the USA in the 1940s (Murch 92). This migration, that made Oakland the largest black metropolis in northern California, continued till 1980, and in that time the city went from 8,462 to 157,484 black residents, which encapsulated 51 percent of the city's total. That is why it should not come as a surprise that Oakland was one of the focal points of Black Power movements in the country, and that this is where the Black Panther Party's (BPP) high ranking members come from. This was also where the organisation was started along with other Black Power organisations (Murch 92).

Most of the jobs the first generation of migrants occupied were tied to shipbuilding, but when their children reached working age in 1960s, the shipbuilding business started dwindling, and the industrial base started cutting jobs, the increased school, neighbourhood and job segregation made the post-war youth frustrated, but this cannot be determined as the only factor that resulted with the later radicalisation (Murch 92). Another factor that played into further radicalisation of black youth were the policies brought out by local government that served to combat "juvenile delinquency". Legislative declarations enabled the police to harass, arrest and incarcerate black youth as they saw fit. To blur the line between the police functions and family services, the arrested young offenders were put through probation officers, judges, and child guidance clinics which they could not get out of on their own accord in most cases. Such a system bore a foundation for criminalisation of black youth and neglect of black families (Murch 92).

While the Watts riots are often seen as the inception of Black Power movements, in the East Bay the roots of the fight for equality go a decade back before the riots (Murch 92). The field in which the clash between the blacks and whites first occurred was the public education. The

black youth had to face the white establishment that was against them, and fight for their place. Moreover, when the black youth entered the California school system it had been under reconstitution because it was preparing for the projected fivefold increase of students in the next 15 years. As the California higher education system had the most funding in the nation and the best educators, the state enabled the members of the minority to finish higher education levels, which resulted with the state having the highest rates of minority college completion in the U.S. by 1969. The minorities earning higher education degrees was vital because racial segregation and discrimination were still rampant in San Francisco primary and secondary schools (Murch 93).

Lower levels of black children's education were neglected by the Oakland's local leadership by allocating most of the funds and other assets to white schools in the richer areas of the city, while all the other overpopulated suburban areas had little to no help (Murch 95). The issues boiled over during the construction of a school in Oakland hills where the school board was accused of unfair financing. This started the 1957 protests of black students and their families against low standards in all-Black McClymond's High School. Financing was not the only issue protested, and the aim of the protests was to fix "the recurring pattern of counsellors and school official discouraging students from continuing their education" (Murch 96). Another problem the black children faced in their schools, besides the ever increasing police presence, was the principals' and teachers' emphasis on discipline, manners and hygiene, instead of school achievement. This, coupled with the lack of hiring black teachers and personnel, resulted in the inevitable future filled with reduced prospects causing poor academic results.

When the BPP still had the "Self-Defense" appendix, the group's roots came from the struggles of black students at Merritt College and University of California (UC, Berkeley) (Jonas 330; Murch 97). While the Black Studies at colleges and universities are often thought

of as products of 1960s black rights movements, in the Bay Area they were the stimulants for the Black Power movement. The fights over education plans and employment in the early 1960s laid foundation for the emergence of Black Power, and other, more extreme, movements. While the BPP focused on the problems, the Black Power movement also cared about the migrant communities that focused on education as the first thing that will enable the children to grow upward in economics (Murch 99). Even before BPP came to be, the black college students at Merritt College organised into councils such as Black Student Union, whose first big demonstration was that against drafting blacks into the military, but their longest battle was for curriculum changes. One of the founders of BPP, Huey Newton, joined the movement at this time, after a confrontation with one of the white teachers due to the contents of that teacher's "Negro History" class. Shortly after, Newton suggested holding a protest where blacks would display guns, invite press and march outside the campus to call attention to police brutality and to entice the college administration to take the students more seriously, but this did not come to fruition as most of the student body refused to participate. This led to Newton distancing himself from the campus politics (Jonas, 433) and presenting himself as "brother off the block" (Murch 100). Newton believed that by using guns as one of the recruiting tools, they could attract the black youth from the streets, while they would still attract the academic youth by using debates and public speeches near the campus. Thus, they would merge college and community, or the campus and the streets (Murch 100). Bobby Seale, the other founding father of BPP, joined the movement when Newton was searching for a way to spark the revolutionary spirit among the Oakland's black community in the law library at the North Oakland Service Center where he researched California penal code. He found what he needed – a decree that legalised carrying exposed firearms. But having discussed this new finding with their peers, Seale and Newton realised they needed to work on their policies before they could organise police patrols.

One of the first BPP public operations took place after several pedestrians had been killed due to bad traffic regulations (Murch 100). Local bureaucracy let Newton and Seale get little to no progress on getting a stoplight at the intersection in question which led to them going to the streets and directing traffic (Hilliard and Cole 46). Taking such matters into their own hands was a tactic the Party employed throughout its history and it was quite effective as it highlighted the institutional negligence that was rampant in Oakland's black neighbourhoods. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in 1966 in response to the harsh and unfair conditions black youth had to deal with every day both in and out of school, and all the other struggles black citizens had to endure due to the systemic segregation (Murch 101). They battled this repression by organising the youth in the Bay Area. After a few years they dropped the "Self-Defense" part of the name and their movement spread all across America "with chapters in more than 61 U.S. cities and 26 states" (Murch 92).

6.3. The Legacy of the Black Power Movement

Modern day Black Studies owe their position in the academia to all the events that took place during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s and to all the militant and non-militant Black Power organisations which, among other policies, wanted their schooling to be connected to their history and the racial injustice they endured (Joseph, "Black studies" 251).

6.3.1. The International Influence on the Black Studies

The subject of Black Studies is at the same time "descriptive, corrective, and prescriptive" (Marable 17-18) with Joseph adding that, based on its evolution through history, it has also been "experiential" ("Black studies" 252). The experiential dimension of its development is explained by the Studies always being under the influence of other larger international events, by the virtue of which its advocates gained their political experience (e.g. through Cold War politics and the struggle to prove that they are not part of a global communist movement) (Joseph 252).

6.3.2. The Internal Factors That Shaped the Black University

Radical organisations, study groups, conferences and journals that were present in the 1960s ignited the spark that started the Black Studies movement, but the movement itself began in 1967 at San Francisco State when some of the lecturers included persons of colour (Joseph, "Black studies" 264). From then till early 1970s the insistence on Black Studies by the restless students spread so widely that they were demanded on predominantly white universities too (such as Yale and Columbia) with demands for improvements at predominantly black universities too (e.g. brining the academia closer to the communities). Some of the demonstrations that sought Black Studies inclusion had students seizing administration buildings at universities.

While some students "utilised black cultural independence to transform educational institutions and practices in American society" (Joseph, "Black studies" 268), the Institute of the Black World (IBW) was an organisation that attempted to investigate the connection between this student awareness and black cultural production with the aim of greater social change. The IBW organised speeches and debates between black scholars and educators, and formed a formidable black "think tank" in that era (Joseph, "Black studies" 268). Moreover, they also organised summer seminars on research in Black Studies which were hosted by veteran activist intellectuals along with some of the younger fighters for racial equality. Through journal publications, the intellectuals connected to IBW put an emphasis on changing the role of the universities towards making them more active participants in making the black community possible and raising the political consciousness of its black students. Nowadays, Black Studies on many campuses are seen as ways of attracting students to enrol, while they rarely serve as tools that introduce change in society (Joseph, "Black studies" 274). The evidence can be found in the fact that many universities do not require Black Studies to be taken up mandatorily or in the fact that Black Studies still have not been

included in basic education curriculum. Vincent Harding, an African-American historian, criticises this state of Black Studies by saying that the "enemy" that is causing the problems in the African-American community is to be found inside the community itself (Harding 16):

> "To identify the enemy is to identify the mesmerizing fear, the debilitating venality, the lack of moral and intellectual self-discipline, the opportunism, the pathological lying, and the self-defeating desire for public recognition and praise which dwell among us. To identify the enemy is to speak truth to our tendency to place all responsibility for black crime upon white people. To identify the enemy is to clarify our unspoken desire for white models, white recognition, white legitimation. To identify the enemy is to point to our failure to believe in ourselves and our tremendous potentials."

This historical overview of the events from 1960s and 1970s is important for the later analysis because it offers social context for the time when the first black comic book superhero, Black Panther, appeared.

7. Contemporary Black Power Movement

In present-day America, racial justice is in the forefront of media's attention, but in spite that the country is still often regarded as "colour-blind" or "postracial" society where race is no longer an issue in everyday life of the citizens and it is not an obstacle for a prosperous life (Taylor 4). The problem lies in the fact that those few successful and influential black Americans might be in the "postracial" era, but for the majority of African-Americans, financial prosperity is rarely a reality. Exactly those deep class differences among African-Americans are more emphasised than among whites because "among whites, the richest have 74 times more wealth than the average white family, while this difference among African-Americans is 200 times more" (Taylor 6). With the difference in wealth, difference in values also changes, and many wealthy black people place the blame of financial failure of other

black people on personal shortcomings, and not on the systemic inequality and bias toward white people.

Another issue that most African-Americans face is institutional racism – "policies, programs, and practices of public and private institutions that result in greater rates of poverty, dispossession, criminalization, illness, and ultimately mortality of African Americans" (Taylor 18). This issue was brought to light during the demonstrations in 1960s, but as the protests died down in 1970s, problems with poverty among black people were ascribed to issues on personal levels or the culture of bad work ethic.

Spearhead of racial justice movement nowadays is the Black Lives Matter movement whose aim is to fight racial discrimination, police brutality against black people and racial profiling in general (Taylor 22). This new movement is also trying to remove the canvas and reveal that American justice system is not colour-blind nor postracial. The interesting facet of this movement is its inception and continuous popularity on social media (Tyalor 157). Social media has helped this movement to spread information without delay. This removes the option of censorship and editing that the traditional media uses and allows everyday people to voice their concerns and publish any institutional injustice they encounter due to their race. The movement was started in a very similar fashion as those in 1960s and seems to only be growing.

During the Ferguson protests in 2014 that followed the killing of a young African-American by a police officer, African-American rights leaders tried to put out the fires that were lit under the community and stop the violence between the police and the protestors. They were unsuccessful because they approached angry young people with condescending speeches in which they blamed them for the violence that occurred in those protests (Taylor 144). Young people who took part in the many protests in that time felt like the contemporary civil rights

leaders were not on their side, out of touch with the problems they were facing, and that they were on their own in their fight for justice and police accountability.

Black Lives Matter started as a hashtag phrase on Twitter, where its creators, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza decided to raise their voices against "oppressions confronting black people in the struggle to end police violence and win justice" (Taylor 162). While some widely known organisations that fight for civil rights look at resolving problems through a legalistic approach, in this case, police brutality was part of the slew of inequality these new activists wanted to solve. Reactions to Ferguson protests made the public see how police violence and the general attitude that the police has towards African-Americans is closely connected to the unemployment and higher levels of poverty. The police are the ones who issue more warrants for arrests to African-Americans and they issue fines, which results in black people getting trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty (Taylor 144).

Before the Ferguson protests were over, video of another police officer killing a black man by asphyxiation circulated the social media and the news, and this made the protestors keep up the fight for racial justice that they started earlier in the year (Taylor 153). The video showed the protestors that police brutality is not only happening in Ferguson. Due to that, the protests were not contained to Ferguson, they now spread to Washington, D.C., New York and the rest of the country followed.

The historic consideration of Black Power movement from the last two sections shows the development of the awareness about black people in general. The development of a society is evident in various parts of culture with one of them being popular media. Since popular media can be considered as one of the "faces of society", films, series, shows, comic books, and other forms of literature show the society's attitude toward a race, gender or any other discriminatory element. In this way, such media depict the evolution of people's attitudes towards individual differences. In this thesis, that evolution can be noticed through the

changes in the representations of black superheroes in the past and now. On the one hand, there are comic books written in 1960s and 1970s (the beginnings of the fight for racial equality by the BPP through educational reform), and on the other, there are present-day movies and television shows (the society is made aware of the black struggle through social media activism).

8. Transforming One Media Into Another

One of the motives for adaptation is to "gain respectability or increase cultural capital" (Hutcheon 91). For example, adapting a critically acclaimed 18th or 19th century novel into a feature film might increase that film's value in the audience's eye due to the fact that it was made after a prestigious literary work. When it comes to transporting the original's content, some critics claim that the adaptation must at the same time hide what the original is, while being obvious in where its source is.

What also matters in adapting a text to a different medium are the adapter's own interests, whether they are political, aesthetic, or autobiographical (Hutcheon 93). However, these interests might not reflect on the audience at all, and the audience could interpret the adaptation completely differently than the adapter's intention was. Due to this fact, the only true interpretation that matters is in the audience's mind, but that does not take away from the value of the adaptation. Additionally, even though the adaptation will always come "temporally second, it is both an interpretive and a creative act; it is storytelling as both rereading and rerelating" (Hutcheon 111).

When it comes to Marvel Studios movie adaptations of comic books, the head of Marvel Studios says (Harrison et al.):

> "I've always believed in expanding the definition of what a Marvel studios movie could be. We try to keep audiences coming back in greater numbers by doing the unexpected and not simply following a pattern or a mold or a formula."

From this, it can be seen that one of the aims is to make the films as popular as possible to create as much revenue, but also to keep many people coming back to the movie theatres and seeing the films they make.

In their analysis of Marvel Studios movies released through the end of 2018, their scripts, and the interviews with all the people involved in them, Harrison et al. found four founding rules that make Marvel's movies so well accepted by the audiences all over the world (Harrison et al.):

1) "select for experienced inexperience;
2) leverage a stable core;
3) keep challenging the formula;
4) cultivate customers' curiosity."

When Marvel is selecting for experienced inexperience that means that they select directors and actors who have experience (and success) in making films in genres different from the superhero genre. Leveraging a stable core of people who work on the movies has helped Marvel keep the stability which enables them to bring in fresh talent while keeping the continuity across their work. The formula that Marvel has is in most movies the same – they introduce heroes, villains, and a third act with battles and a lot of CGI. However, their movies differ in emotions, locations, the messages which movies want to send to the audience, and many other smaller details. For example, while *Iron Man* is critically acclaimed because it introduced authenticity and realism into the superhero genre, *Black Panther* was praised for its criticism of the contemporary society, and characters that are politically conscious (Harrison et al.). Having a universe as vast as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and building a movie franchise on top of that helps keep audience's curiosity. It makes them want to discover all the connections between characters and events, which in turn makes them feel like they are a part of that universe.

Comic book adaptations to movies and television were selected for the present analysis because they occupy a large area of current popular culture. Marvel and DC Comics are the two biggest competitors when comic books are considered. As it was already mentioned, the movie *Black Panther* was very successful when it came out and that is why this character was chosen for the analysis. Another Marvel superhero, Luke Cage, was chosen because his television series came out two years before *Black Panther* movie, and because he was also one of the first black superheroes to appear in comic books. Furthermore, DC's Black Lightning was chosen because he was their first black superhero to have his own comic book series, along with having a television series adaptation. These three heroes were selected because their adaptations came out in the last four years, and are representative of the current social climate as were their first comic book appearances when they came out.

What is more, superheroes were specifically chosen for this analysis because they are not real and their authors had no limitations in representing them, but the comic books they appeared in showed what a black superhero was in the minds of 1960s and 1970s authors. Additionally, the change that is apparent in the two adaptations of each hero shows how all the fights for social justice in the U.S. changed the way in which black superheroes are represented (which includes both their depictions, and the depictions of the spaces they occupy and live in).

9. Black Panther's Early Comic Book Appearances

Black Panther (T'Challa) first appeared in *Fantastic Four* comic books (Lee et al.,) as the first black and the first African superhero (Fraser, 2010), but his first appearance was not planned nor connected to the civil rights movements happening in the U.S. at that time (Nama 42). He was introduced as a chieftain of an unknown African country (Wakanda) that wanted to host a group of American superheroes (the Fantastic Four) in the greatest hunt of all time in their honour (Lee et al., "The Black Panther"). His first appearance in the

illustrated form was him sitting in a throne, surrounded by his people, who all have guns and spears, in what looks like a typical African village with wooden huts (figure 1). What the Fantastic Four do not know is that they will be the prey in the traditional hunt, and the Black Panther will be the hunter. Later on, the reader finds out that the hunt was Black Panther's way of testing himself if he could face his real nemesis, the Klaw, a white coloniser who killed Black Panther's father when he invaded Wakanda (Black Panther's homeland) and tried to take their invaluable ore, vibranium (Lee et al., "The Black Panther"; Lee et al., "The Way"). The Fantastic Four have arrived in Wakanda just in time when it was predicted that Klaw would try to take vibranium again, but this time the nation was much more developed and utilised the vibranium to create defences, and a technological jungle (figure 2). The Black Panther manages to defeat the Klaw and he and the Fantastic Four become allies who are friendly with each other from that point on in these first issues of the comic book.

While the context in which Black Panther first appears might be considered as Lee at al. being progressive for their time, there are still parts of these first Black Panther's appearances that have some contexts, monologues, dialogues, and illustrations that have stereotypical imagery. Some of the stereotypes from the time the comic book was made are seen in the small details of the illustrations. Figures 1 and 2 show two different surroundings of what the reader learns is Wakanda, a never-colonised country in continental Africa. Figure 1 shows a typical African village in which, if the reader was unaware of the context, a warlord rules. There is no evidence of advancement, while figure 2 shows a different perspective – that of a technological jungle. This shows that, while they have precious alien technology at their fingertips, the Wakandans still have to live in wooden huts, and build a jungle where there is none. The undertones of stereotypical imagery of African people being unable to disconnect from the nature are plain to see if one is to carefully examine these two examples.

Additionally, when the characters in the background are considered, they are still all wearing

traditional clothes made of animal hides instead of clothes that are sewn from cotton or some advanced material that their technological advancement would enable them to use.

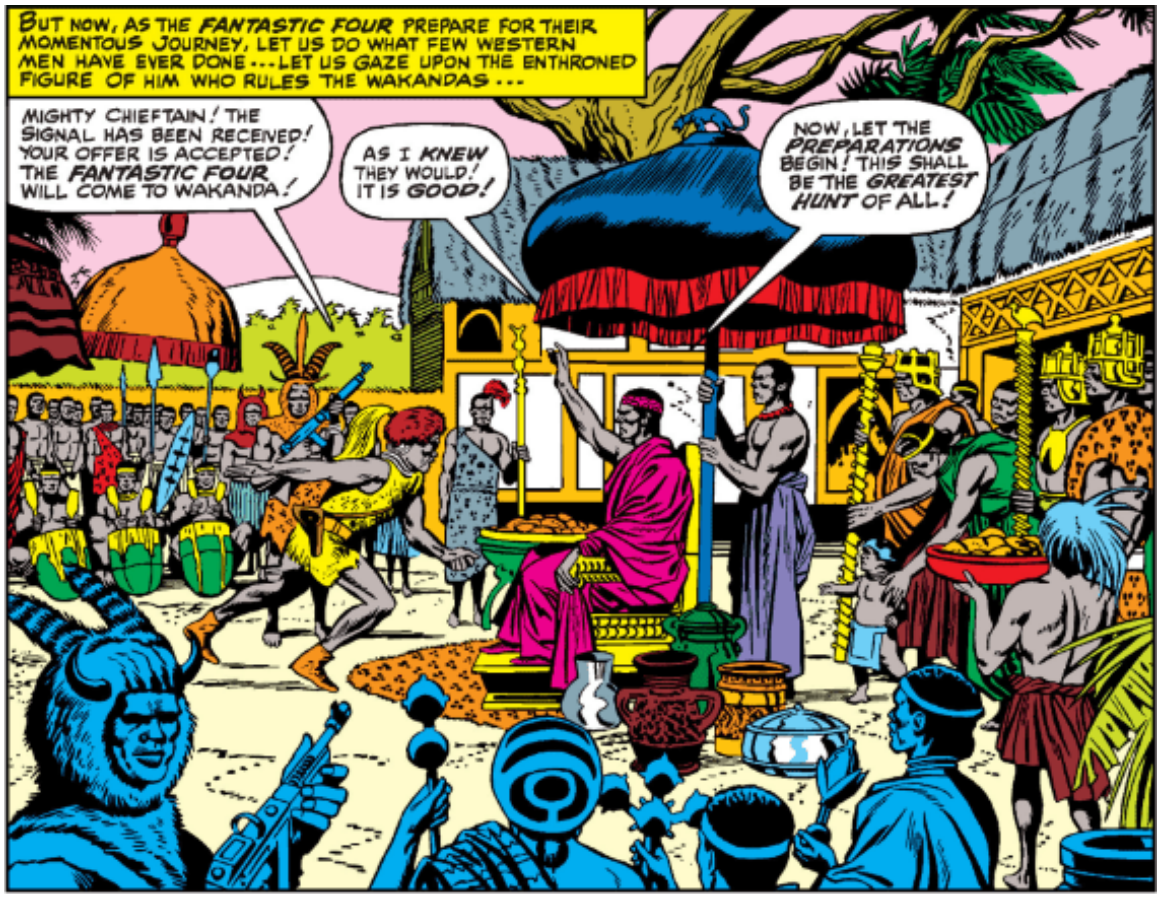

Figure 1. King T'Challa's first appearance in comic books (Lee et al. "The Black Panther" 5).

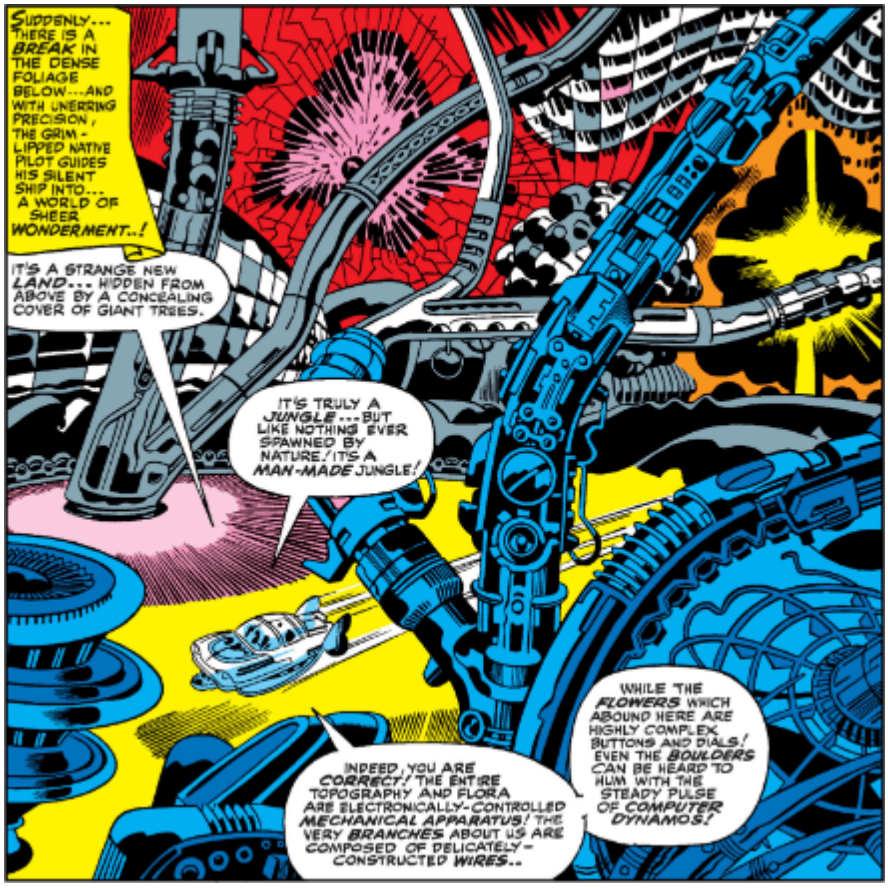

Figure 2. The Fantastic Four are amazed by the technological jungle that surrounds them (Lee et al., "The Black Panther" 10).

Furthermore, when the Black Panther retells the origin of his clash against the Klaw, it can be seen that before this white coloniser came to Wakanda, the Wakandan people did not utilise vibranium at all (figure 3). The only connection to the vibranium they had was that their leader was in charge of protecting it (protecting the nature). The Orientalist imagery here is found in the fact that it was the colonisers who had to come to this country in equatorial Africa, discover a precious ore, and indirectly show the natives that their land can be used in a better way.

In figure 4, one can notice that after T'Challa's father is murdered by the Klaw, he is overcome with emotion and goes on an anger-filled hunt for the Klaw and tries to murder him and his helpers. Once again has a black man been depicted as the one who is unable to control his emotions and who reacts with anger against the whites. This imagery is even more

noticeable when the Klaw's reaction is examined after T'Challa injures him (figure 4). The Klaw's hand is injured, but instead of charging the young T'Challa, he keeps his cool, retreats and decides to plan his next attack.

Figure 3. Wakandans only protect vibranium; White coloniser shows Wakandans vibranium can be used (Lee et al., "The Way" 7-8).

Figure 4. The difference in emotions of a Black hero and white villain (Lee et al., "The Way" 8, 10).

Moreover, after the Black Panther defeats the Klaw 10 years later, his aggressive personality once again comes to surface because he expresses that he is in disbelief that there will be no

more need for the Black Panther (figure 5). What adds to this feeling of aggressive nature is the comment of one of the members of the Fantastic Four who tells the Black Panther that he can join one of the New York street gangs who the Fantastic Four have defeated multiple times.

“

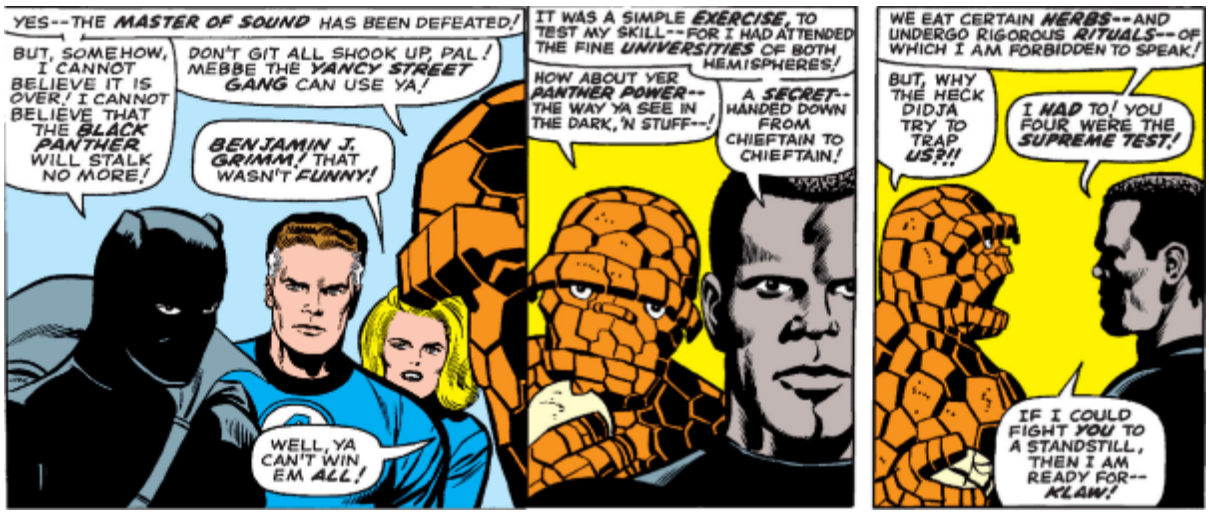

Figure 5. Black Panther in disbelief; The source of Black Panther's power (Lee et al., “The Way” 11, 21).

10. Black Panther in His First Feature Film

The *Black Panther* feature film came out in 2018 and was directed by Ryan Coogler who did not refrain from presenting the problematic reality of what it means to be a person of colour in contemporary America (Smith). As it was mentioned earlier, the movie was well received by both the audience (which is witnessed by the movie’s box office success (imdb.com, “Avengers: Endgame”)) and the critics (imdb.com, “Black Panther”; Smith).

The movie sets the scene, shows Wakanda and the Black Panther, but the main story revolves around T’Challa’s conflict with his cousin, who goes by name Killmonger, who wants to return to Wakanda, and aims to dethrone T’Challa. Killmonger left Wakanda as a child and was raised in New York, and joined American black-ops army branch (Coogler, “Black Panther”).

When it comes to the imagery where black people are represented in this movie, it is very hard to find the depictions that are similar to those found in the first appearances of Black Panther in comic books.

Wakanda is represented very similarly to the representation in the comic books. From the outside it is a jungle, from the inside it is a technologically advanced country with skyscrapers and hovering vehicles (Coogler, "Black Panther"). It seems that the makers of the film have stayed true to the original and decided that the streets of Wakanda have to be a bit dusty and covered with overgrown vegetation (figure 6).

Figure 6. The streets of Wakanda (Coogler, "Black Panther").

T'Challa is depicted as a wise king who is in control of his emotions and there is only one instance where his emotions almost overcome him, when he encounters Klaue (the movie's equivalent to the Klaw from the comic books). He is stopped by his entourage so he does not fulfil his urge to hurt Klaue.

All of the stereotypes and the negative attributes that black people had in the media from the time when the comic book that inspired this movie was first published are condensed in the movie's main supervillain – Killmonger (figure 7). He is a child of Wakanda who was left in the West to fend for himself after T'Challa's father murdered his father. He is the one who is framed as stereotypically emotional black man whose whole life was consumed by the thirst for revenge and fight against T'Challa. He was under the influence of the Occident's power,

the army, and he assumes the role of the coloniser who comes to Wakanda and starts distributing weapons over the world to take rule over it. Additionally, he often mentions the struggle of the black people in the past which puts him in the role which black people have played throughout history – the muscular strong black man who waits for the moment in which he will strike the whites and get revenge (except this time, his first victim is a black man). On the other hand, the character of Black Panther is the opposite of him. He is calm, collected and cares for peace and collaboration with the rest of the world. If one were to describe him in the context of movies of 1950s, he has all the characteristics of a white person.

Figure 7. Killmonger (on the right) fights T'Challa (on the left) for the throne (Coogler, "Black Panther").

Encountering such non-stereotypical and culturally conscious imagery of black people does not surprise since the director of this movie is also a black man who was aware of the struggle that black people go through in most cases. That is why the movie references Oakland (a place of birth of BPP) multiple times, as a sort of homage to the past.

Additionally, in his dying moments, Killmonger mentions that he would rather die than endure being chained up in captivity as his ancestors were when they were coming to America, which references slavery.

11. Luke Cage in First *Hero for Hire* Volume

Luke Cage first appeared in Marvel Comics' *Hero for Hire* series in 1972, where he is presented as "a superhero (…) unlike any other before him" (Lee et al., ""Out of Hell" 1). The comic book starts with Cage's origin story though which he is shown as a man, Lucas, who was wrongfully convicted, and is serving a long prison sentence in a maximum security prison. There, the guards do not like him, and he prefers to be a "lone wolf" who refuses to join any prison gang or help the prison administration spy on other prisoners. His chance for a pardon comes when a new warden is appointed. The warden employs a new white doctor that is committed to finding a cure for many diseases through experimentation on human subjects. Doctor Burstein selects Cage as a perfect candidate to experiment on and Cage accepts his offer in exchange for freedom. During the first night of taking part in the experiment, a guard tries to kill Cage by fiddling with research equipment, and Cage is exposed to a dose of chemicals that would kill any normal person. Though, Cage gets out of the chemical vat stronger and with skin impenetrable by bullets, accidentally fatally wounds the guard that attempted to murder him and figures out that he is now so strong he can tear down the prison walls with his bare hands, which enables him to escape. After coming back home to Harlem, he is driven by his need for vengeance against Stryker, the man that planted the drugs in Cage's flat, and who let Cage's wife-to-be get murdered in a gang shootout while Cage was in prison. Following a series of events where he helped a person get back their money from a robber, Cage decides to advertise himself as hero for hire to earn for his livelihood. He picks a costume and, from then on, works cases where people need a man with superhuman abilities, and seeks revenge against Stryker in his free time.

Luke Cage can be seen on the cover page and the second page (figure 8) of the comic he first occurs in. Immediately, the readers can notice that this comic book has the elements of the art they could encounter on the TV screen during the Blaxploitation era[1] – an attractive black female with an emphasised afro hair, dice, poker cards, a black man holding a gun, signs saying "Girls" and "Bar" and policemen standing over a black man in a prison; all that behind the main superhero who is wearing tight black pants, a chain instead of a belt, a yellow shirt that shows his whole torso, an angry facial expression, and an afro hair style also. When this imagery is put into juxtaposition with words saying that he is "a superhero unlike any other before him" it makes the reader think that they will go through a Blaxploitation movie in a comic book form – and they would not be completely wrong. The art style in this comic book depicts most black men and women with afros, everyone has a connection to some sort of a crime syndicate, the women are attractive, and that is often a reason for their black boyfriends to be aggressive. Additionally, Luke Cage is presented as a superhero from Harlem, who, after escaping prison, returns there and takes up protecting its residents from various (inside and outside) threats. In this case, it seems that Harlem is the Orient where crime happens, Luke Cage is a kind of an imposter who is different from that "wilderness" and who has to have superpowers in order to overcome and control it. Furthermore, Luke Cage presents the Occident in Harlem, because he was incarcerated and went through prison system. Even though it is not expressed explicitly in the first issues of the comic book, he is influenced by his imprisonment, and a changed man who decides to stay out of gangs and street violence until he accidentally gains superpowers. Moreover, he makes the other black men fall in line and does a better job at it than the police (the "real" Occident) because they do not have information and the Harlem experience Cage does.

[1] During Blaxploitation cinema (from 1969 to 1975) black actors were degraded, black liberationists were mocked in an indirect manner by misrepresenting the reality of black people's lives in movies (Robinson, 1998). Everyday life of black people was presented as filled with vigilantes, drug trade, and prostitution with plots usually developing in the ghetto streets, the police stations, the strip clubs and dealer's locales (Robinson, 1998).

Figure 8. Luke Cage cover page and first page (Lee et al., “Out of Hell” 0-1).

The first image of Cage that the readers can encounter after the title page is him coming out of solitary confinement in Seagate maximum security prison (figure 9). He is verbally berated by a white guard named Quirt who does not consider him human, derogatorily calls him “boy”, and who constantly threatens him with beatings.

Figure 9. Quirt's relationship with Cage (Lee et al., “Out of Hell” 2).

When Cage refuses to be an informant for the warden, he is once again put in solitary confinement where Quirt begins beating him up with other white officers watching. Quirt embodies the intolerance that black people had to endure in prisons where they were put time and time again due to the system that repeatedly set them up for failure. On the other hand,

Cage is in those situations subordinate to Quirt and suffers in silence, while waiting patiently for his revenge. This thirst for revenge is shown in his violent outbursts toward white guards while in prison, but also in parole hearings where he could not keep his calm, which made him lose opportunity to get out of prison earlier (figure 10).

Figure 10. Cage cannot always keep calm and has violent needs (Lee et al., "Out of Hell" 8, 14).

The only time Cage was able to let his anger out before becoming superhuman was when the new (white) warden arrived and *allowed* Cage to beat up Quirt for all the times Quirt beat him up before (figure 11). Since the black man could not help himself, a white man had to intervene (the warden), allowing him to fulfil his anger and to become obedient once again because, ever since then, Cage works with the doctor that the new warden appoints.

Figure 11. Quirt is violent against Cage who is allowed to get his revenge by the new (white) warden (Lee et al., "Out of Hell" 5, 6).

The first time Cage is put under the influence of chemicals, the ex-warden fiddles with the equipment and then Cage is exposed to a much greater dose of chemicals than intended, which gives him strong skin impenetrable by bullets and superhuman strength. The way that Cage is illustrated in the moment when he breaks out of the chemical vat (figure 12) is typical for that of fetishism which was present during the time when the West colonised Africa and represented African men in illustrations – muscular, and full of rage against the whites. In this case, Cage is angry at the guard who tried to hurt him, but the doctor, who has not done anything against Cage until then, was also frightened of Cage attacking him (figure 12). What adds to this atmosphere filled with fear are the narrator's words which dehumanise Cage (Lee et al., "Out of Hell" 17): "Then, searing skin, crawling flesh, can endure no more…!" Cage is reduced to a mass of organic tissue to increase the sense of fear the guard and the doctor are feeling. Additionally, to enhance this dreadful atmosphere, narrator says: "Fists frantically hammer metal … as electronic power hits the overload point … and there is sudden, explosive ---- release!" (Lee et al., "Out of Hell" 17). Here, electronic power can be seen as a metaphor for the anger and rage against the guards Cage has kept hidden, because immediately after breaking out of the vat, he hits the guard and starts beating prison walls and escapes the prison island and goes home to Harlem, where he seeks revenge against Stryker while working as a hero for hire.

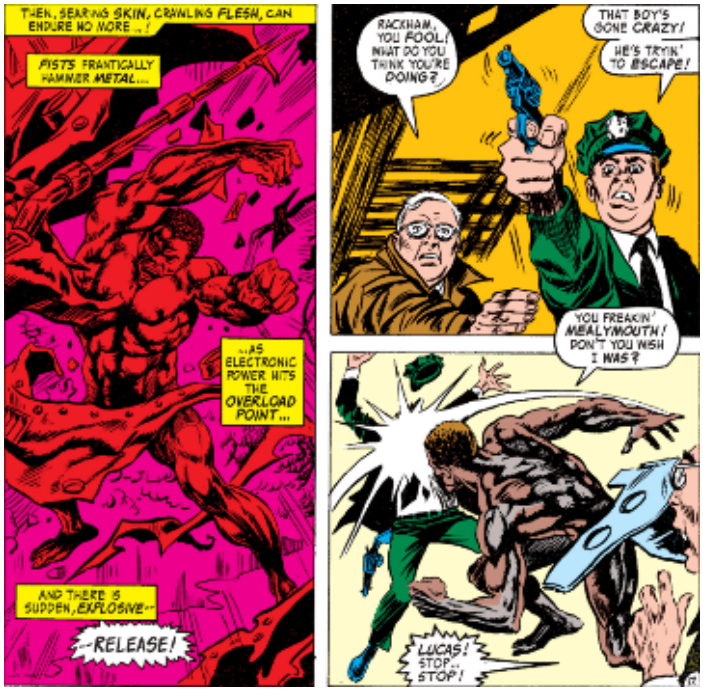

Figure 12. Luke Cage breaks out of the chemical vat (Lee et al., "Out of Hell" 17).

Luke Cage's Harlem is similarly portrayed as Black Panther's Wakanda. This area requires a person of superhuman strength and abilities to tame the people who live there (figure 13). It is as if the geography makes the people act more aggressively than in other parts of New York. While Cage was away in prison, crime syndicates have torn through Harlem as they saw fit. Stryker became known as Diamondback and his criminal enterprise grew significantly. His followers cause problems for normal, honest people of Harlem. A situation like that still is not enough for Cage to forget of his thirst for vengeance against Diamondback – the writers make it seem like that is the only thing on Cage's mind. It is not surprising to find such a representation of black characters here. This comic book was made during the Blaxploitation era in cinema where black characters were depicted as vigilantes, and it seems that this influenced the writers. Not only was Cage a vigilante, he was a vigilante for hire – and his morals are questioned only later when he encounters doctor Burstein again.

Figure 13. Cage returns to New York and is attacked by a robber almost immediately (Lee et al., “Out of Hell” 21).

Having defeated Stryker, Cage keeps working as a hero for hire and his next case puts him up against an ex-army general Mace who plans on attacking Harlem, but Cage successfully overcomes him and his companions with his superhuman abilities. Cage’s vigilantism is not questioned by the police in any of these first three issues, as if they are relieved that someone is finally policing Harlem better than they could – all it took was superhuman strength and a black man who has spent most of his life in institutional subjugation to a system ruled by whites.

12. Luke Cage in Television Series

In Netflix’s series that has the same name as its main hero, Luke Cage is introduced as a superhuman who keeps a low profile by working in at *Pop’s* barbershop and *Harlem Paradise* nightclub in Harlem (McGuigan, “Moment”). He first uses his superpowers when he fights off criminals who were trying to extort money from his landlords. Due to the events in Harlem and rise in violence in the streets, Cage’s superpowers are harder and harder to

keep secret, and after Pop is killed in a shooting, Cage decides to keep the barber shop, which was considered “Harlem’s Switzerland” where no criminal business was to be made. After Pop’s death, Cage decides to bring his murderers to justice, and this leads to him revealing his powers to the general public. Unlike some other heroes, Cage does not keep his identity a secret and people start coming to the barbershop seeking his help. The main villain of the series’ first season is Willis Stryker, also known as Diamondback, who is the criminal lord in that part of Harlem. The culmination of the season is when Diamondback and Cage fight, and the whole Harlem is watching them.

When it comes to analysing the elements of colonialism, and representation of black superheroes, the most interesting episode of the series’ first season is the fourth episode (Natali, “Step”). In this episode, a bold-headed Cage is trapped under a rubble of a collapsed building and a retrospective of his prison days is presented.

On his first day of being in prison, Cage was hit by the head guard Rackham in the gut, a sign of things to come during his stay in this prison if he does not follow the rules. The differences from the comic book depiction of Cage can be noticed during the first night in prison. He is presented in his cell during the night and he is emotional, hitting the prison walls with his fists so hard his knuckles are bleeding. While comic book Cage was presented as only an angry black man during his prison time, Cage from the TV series is presented as an emotional man who misses his freedom and shows the pain caused by the lack of freedom (figure 14). This is great contrast from the comic book. Cage’s humanity is shown, he is not an angry black man who wants revenge, but just another human with emotions and need for freedom.

Figure 14. Cage crying and bleeding during his first night in prison (Natali, “Step”).

One of the greater stylistic changes that the director had in this episode was their depiction of Cage’s first love from the comic books – Reva Connors. While the comic book depicts her as having an afro, and as a typical pretty girl from Blaxploitation era cinema, the TV series shows advancements in depictions of people of colour, and Reva is played by a person who does not have an afro hairstyle, and who is not just a helpless girl, but a psychologist working in a prison (figure 15). Additionally, while Reva’s role in comic books is that of a lover, in the TV series it is much more than that. She is the one who helps Cage deal with prison and socialise. After Cage escapes prison, she helps him get a new identity and hide his powers from public records. This shows a progress in representation of black female characters from only being lovers and secondary to that of a capable woman who is the key to a man’s success and without whom the male hero could not have it as easy.

Figure 15. Reva Connors in Netflix's TV series (Natali, “Step”) and in Marvel Comic's comic book (Lee et al, “Out of Hell” 13).

Another important difference in appearance is in Cage himself (figure 16). Cage from the comic book is presented as a superhero in a flashy revealing outfit with an afro, while the TV series Cage wears everyday clothes like hoodies or suits in more formal occasions. This shows that the TV series’ directors did not go the way of making Cage a typical Blaxploitation era vigilante in a suit that is borderline humoristic, but a hero with whom the audience can more easily connect. Additionally, him wearing a hoodie can also be seen as the director’s homage to protests that occurred after Trayvon Martin’s[2] killing.

Moreover, Cage in the TV series is presented as a calm and collected man who can, in most cases, control his anger. While he wants to put a stop to violence in Harlem, he does not rush to do it in an angry rage, as it was presented in the comic books. He also cares for Harlem’s culture: “Harlem is supposed to represent our hopes and dreams. It’s the pinnacle of black art … politics … innovation.” (Johnson, C. “You know”), which is a major change from depictions of black people as a group without culture and who are deeply connected to nature in the comic books. This shows that the contemporary cinema has moved away from tropes

[2] A black teenager who was fatally wounded by a member of community watch in 2012 when he was coming back home from a store (Miami Herald, 2017).

of the past, and that (at least in the forefront) it keeps in mind that different representations of black people are more welcome.

Figure 16. Luke Cage's most common outfit in the TV series (Liu, “Soul Brother”).

The area of Harlem where Cage operates mostly in the TV series is an area where one cannot ever be safe. Whether it is the black gangs, Asian gangs or Puerto Rican gangs, Harlem is presented as an area of New York where police cannot put a stop to all the “outsiders” being violent against each other. Harlem is depicted in a similar way as were many colonies during the 19th century. In the same vein as those Oriental colonies “needed” Occident to save them from themselves, so does Harlem need a super-Occident to keep it in check. Even then, the Orient responds by giving more resistance to peace by innovative weapons that can wound even the Harlem’s hero. Maybe unintentionally, but this comes to forefront when Cage is fighting Diamondback in season one finale. People gather around them to witness (and record) their battle, and are cheering Cage on. What is more, the police are also present, but they also stand aside until Cage himself defeats the worst that the Harlem Orient had to offer – a man in a super suit that could hurt even Cage who has impenetrable skin.

13. Black Lightning as One of the First DC Comics' Black Superheroes

Black Lightning first appeared in DC Comics' comic book with the same title in 1977, and he was the first DC Comics' African-American superhero with his own series (Nama 25). The first issue of the comic book presents him in medias res, attacking gang members and going after them because they killed one of the high school students form the school he teaches at when he is not fighting crime. He is described as an ex-Olympic medallist who returned to his home in Suicide Slums, a dangerous neighbourhood in Metropolis (an imaginary city in the U.S. in the DC Comics universe) to help return peace (Isabella et al., "Black Lightning #1" 1). While he has no super powers, his sidekick Gambi helps him by making him a suit and a utility belt with different gadgets that incapacitate Black Lightning's adversaries. He, most often, fights a gang known as The 100, and their boss, Tobias Whale, who is trying to build a drug-dealing empire in the city. In the first issues, he even finds himself at odds with Superman who thinks that Black Lightning killed one of the criminals he was fighting (Isabella et al., "Beware").

As it seems that was the trend with black superheroes in that period, Black Lightning was illustrated as a muscular black superhero on the cover of the first issue (figure 17). He is wearing a black, blue and yellow suit and an afro hairstyle wig with a mask attached to it. It carries similarities to the Blaxploitation atmosphere of Luke Cage, but it does not use so much of that style. However, immediately, the old stereotypes of black people being represented physically in good condition and with pronounced muscles can be noticed. If that was not enough, he is later described as an ex-Olympian who was a champion in some disciplines, and when he arrives at the high school he teaches at, he also shows that he is skilled in basketball too. Additionally, his facial expression in most of the scenes is angry (figure 17), which alludes to his inability to calm down and take control over his emotions. This translates to the pacing of the story in the first issue. The reader is cast into one of the

fighting scenes, and when flashbacks happen he fights someone else again. He is a hero who seems to resolve everything with physical violence.

Figure 17. Black Lightning #1 cover page and different faces of Black Lightning's anger (Isabella et al., “Black Lightning #1” 0-3, 5, 7,14)

Expanding on the anger shown in the first issues, Black Lightning seems to not hesitate to have violent outbursts (figure 18). Besides being shown saying that it is now his turn to wreck people on the cover page, Black Lightning is portrayed as a black vigilante who is always angry and ready to let out that anger, similarly to other black characters. Even though his anger is not described as being directed towards the whites, his first adversary that was shown was white, and he contemplates killing him in an internal monologue (figure 18). Moreover, in his last encounter with that criminal, he calls himself “a creature of violence” that fights against gangs. At other times, he proclaims that he is filled with “righteous rage”

that helps his deduction. This seems to be used as a device to decrease the character's humanity and emphasise his natural need for conflict (figure 18).

Figure 18. Expression of Black Lightning's violent character (Isabella et al.,"Black Lightning #1" 3; Isabella et al., "Beware" 3, 14).

Black Lightning's home, Suicide Slums, is described as a crime-ridden area where gangs have the final say and they change one crime boss after another (figure 19). When Black Lightning was away at the Olympics, his neighbourhood got worse and worse. This has similarities with Luke Cage's situation when he returns from prison. Once again, a black superhero has to have special abilities (or special gadgets in this case) in order to keep their home in check. Black Lightning has to, with the help of his white sidekick, return the peace to the neighbourhood. This old white sidekick Gambi represents the Occident in this crime-infested Orient, and he is the one who points the Black Lightning, the "super-Orient", in the

direction of crime. What is more, Gambi was the one who raised Black Lightning, which might be included in the character's origin story to show the readers that the black superhero was not completely "normally" raised. This makes him an ally to both sides – the Orient and the Occident. The situation in the slums is also described by a white chief of the organised crime division of Metropolis police department (figure 19). He says that The 100 are making the neighbourhood even worse a jungle than it was. Such a description emphasises that the people living in this area are hard to control and that outsiders are unwelcome there. Adding to this, he says they need a man like Black Lightning to control the area.

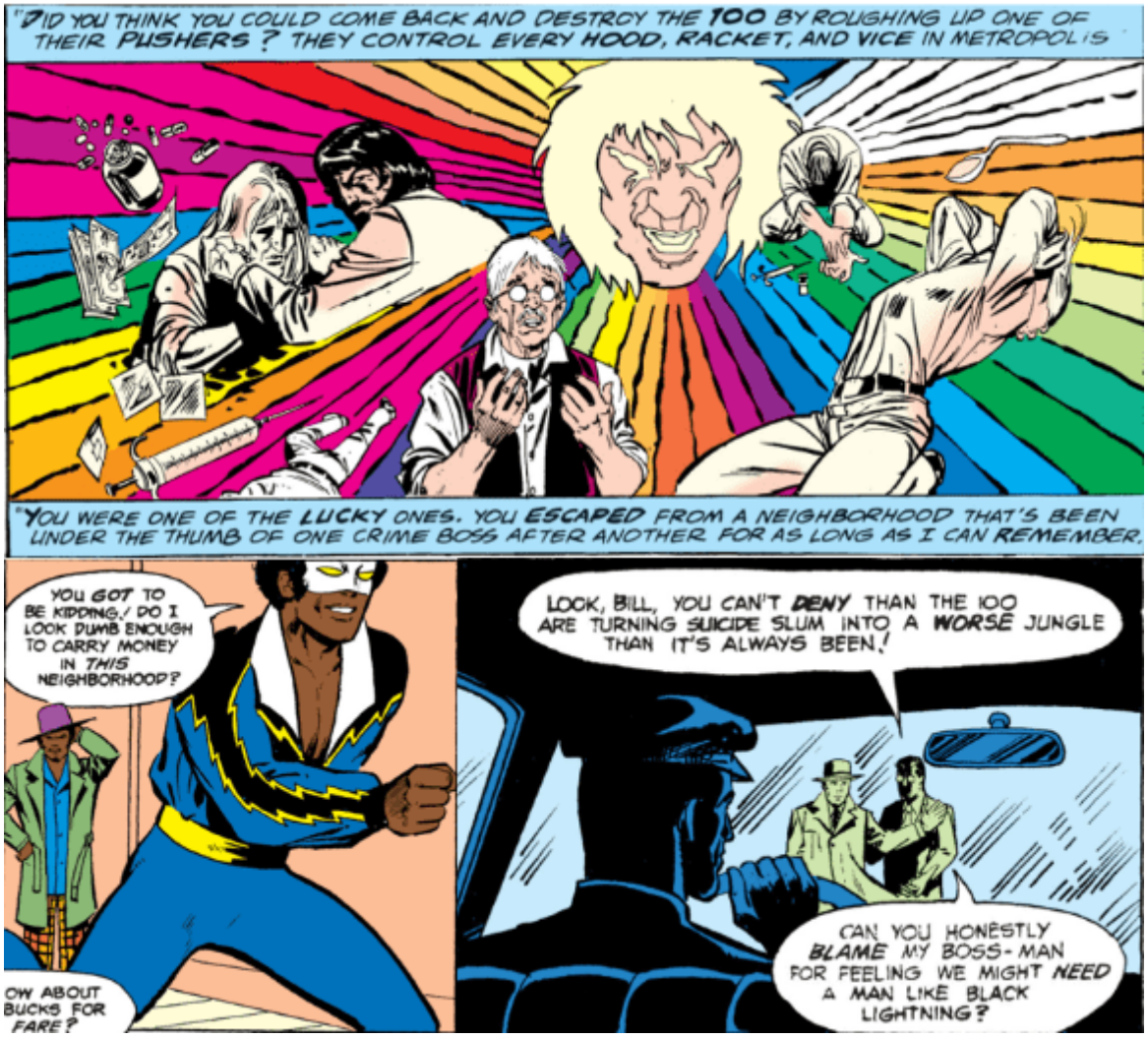

Figure 19. Descriptions of Suicide Slums (Isabella et al., "Black Lightning #1" 14; Isabella et al., "Every Hand" 6).

In one of the next issues, Black Lightning expands on this topic and describes to Superman why his role in the neighbourhood is crucial (figure 20). He claims that the slums need someone like him to fight the gangs from the inside, "from the gutter". By saying this, he accepts the task of being the infiltrator that will take care of the Orient, and bring peace to it. After this, Superman distances himself from the area and lets Black Lightning take care of problems there, as if he gave Black Lightning the go-ahead that he has to give out, since he is the main superhero of Metropolis.

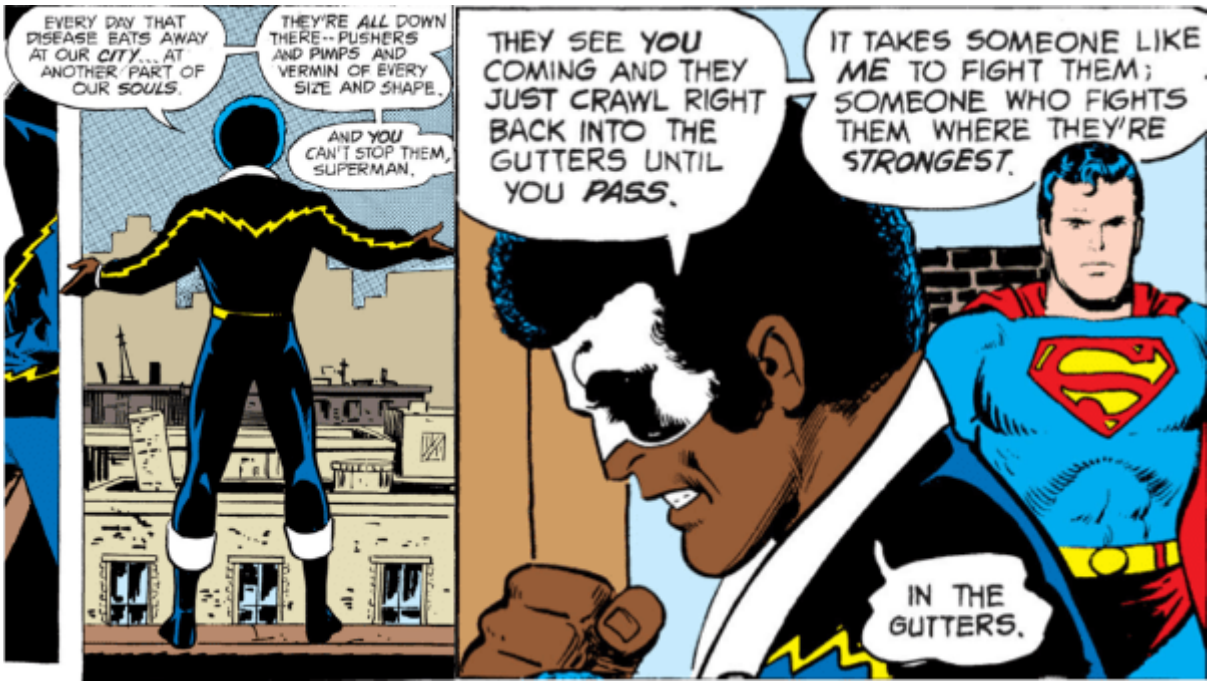

Figure 20. Black Lightning explains his role in the neighbourhood to Superman (Isabella et al. "Nobody Beats" 12).

From this analysis of Black Lightning, one can see that the stereotype-influenced imagery of black people was still present in the comic books made in late 1970s, despite the social justice movements going on at that time. Black Lighting does not go as deep into the Blaxploitation style as Luke Cage does, but the black hero has an afro hairstyle, and he is still a part of the Occident that has successfully "infiltrated" the Orient, and will fix it from within.

14. Salim Akil's Black Lighting Television Series

In his first television appearance, Black Lightning is introduced as a high school principal in Freeland, Jefferson Pierce, who is trying to stay away from using his superpowers (Akil, "The Resurrection"). The plot is happening 30 years after he last fought a criminal boss, Tobias Whale, and was nearly killed. Ever since then, Pierce has tried to change the neighbourhood through his work as a principal, but he cannot control himself anymore after his daughter is put in danger and he is racially profiled by the police. He slowly returns to his superhero work at his sidekick, Gambi's, continuous urging. Since the neighbourhood is filled with gangs that are selling drugs, he is trying to work his way up the chain and discovers that one of the heads of the criminal organisations is Whale himself, who he thought was dead. Since then, he is motivated by trying to bring Whale to justice. Throughout the first season of the show, his daughters also start exhibiting superhuman powers in a similar way that he did when he was young.

In the television series, Black Lightning has a different costume to the one he uses in the comic books (figure 21). His body is protected by a suit made from special cloth that stops bullets, and it does not look like it came from Blaxploitation films. Moreover, the series abandoned the afro hairstyle in order to avoid conforming to the stereotypes from the past. Maybe the most interesting representation is that of the series' villain, Tobias Whale (figure 21). In the comic book, Whale is described as a person with albinism and is often presented as unusual looking human. In the TV series, Whale is played by an African-American person with albinism. His character is presented as extremely against black people of his time. He continually repeats old stereotypes used against black people like calling them Uncle Toms, lazy and worthless. What is more, he is also presented as cruel because he has piranhas as pets which he feeds with people who he wants to kill. In this, a sort of paradox of his character is shown. He hates his black heritage, but he still has piranhas as pets, a habit that

shows he still conforms to some stereotypes from the past of black people being closer to nature than the whites.

Figure 21. Black Lightning and Tobias Whale in the television series (Akil, “The Resurrection”).

Perhaps more interesting than the representation of the villain is the representation of the city of Freeland. Since The 100 operate throughout the whole city, Peirce has made its high school a neutral territory to protect the students. However, things change when thugs come to school and kidnap one of the students, Pierce’s daughter. This portrays the area as full of dangerous black criminals who do not follow their word and are shifty. Moreover, later in the season, Pierce is betrayed by his black female vice principal who was secretly working with a governmental organisation that wants to control people with special abilities. Additionally, more descriptions of how bad the city is can be found in dialogues. Some characters say that death, kidnapping, and violence are just part of growing up there. White commander of the special unit describes the place as filled with people who are only good for experimentation. He claims that the drugs give their life a purpose and direction, justifying it by saying that they are doing God’s work. That is why 30 years ago they created a drug that would make Freeland’s citizens docile and easily controlled. Nowadays, that drug is a bit modified and the

citizens take it of their own volition, but it gives some people special abilities. This can be interpreted in the same way the colonizers in the 19th century saw the colonies – places that need to be tamed and experimented on.

The relationship between Black Lightning and his white sidekick Gambi shows some more of those colonial undertones. In the beginning of the series, Pierce refuses to go back to being a hero, but Gambi urges him to protect the ghetto once more. He often serves as a voice of reason, the Occident that is there to protect the Orient from itself. That prevents Black Lightning from making wrong decisions. In this, Black Lightning is often shown as muscle, while Gambi is the brains. Gambi's control over the city is also seen in his comments saying the city's power grid is so easy to hack, which gives him control over the area. To add to this, Gambi also serves as a calming voice when Black Lightning's or any other member of his family's temper gets the best of them. So even though Gambi's primary role is that of a sidekick, his whiteness often gives him the upper hand over the decisions black superheroes make, as if even their special abilities are not enough to overcome it.

15. Conclusion

Having considered the theoretical basis for the analysis of the superheroes presented in this thesis, and the historical conditions in which each of these hero's origins can be traced, there are some possible causalities to be considered. This thesis gave the overview of superheroes with the emphasis on their appearance, their personalities, the people they interact with and the places they live in. The comic books that were analysed illustrate black people as strong, muscular and athletic, while their adaptations do not give significance to their physical appearance. Earlier representations of the black superheroes show their aggressive nature and vengeful spirit primarily, but the contemporary adaptations present them as people with a whole spectrum of emotions. The people they are surrounded by take different roles in the main character's life (e.g. in comic book, Reva is only Luke Cage's lover, while in the

television series, she helps him establish social interactions and life after prison). With all these elements mentioned, the setting cannot be ignored. The superheroes occupy a similar space in both representations where they fulfil similar roles (e.g. they can often be considered as the Occident that controls the Orient they live in).

The comic books that were analysed came out in 1960s and 1970s respectively. That was the era of great turmoil when it comes to representation of black people's needs in the society. They were fighting systemic injustice that put them in prison for life, without a life sentence being put out. They were hindered from the beginning by being given worse education opportunities. Moreover, they migrated from the American South in hopes of a better life in the North's big cities, but they were met by discrimination.

In a way, comic books of that era represent that struggle. The Black Panther was coincidentally given the same name as the Black Panther Party, but the character was fighting similar fights to those the Party did. Using his special abilities, Black Panther protected his people and fought against white oppression, and, if a comparison like that is allowed, the BPP also fought for complete freedom of black identity and against systemic oppression that put black people in prison for not paying a fine. The character of Luke Cage also reflects the political atmosphere of that age. He impersonates the black struggle of being falsely accused of a crime and imprisoned. It took superpowers for him to break out of the system that was set up against him, and those superpowers can be equated to the great spread of revolutionary power that black Americans showed in post-Civil War racial equality struggles. As Luke Cage gave hope to the people of Harlem, so did the many organisations of that era give hope to black people in America that the change was coming.

Black Lightning follows the similar pattern as Luke Cage. He was at the Olympics and when he came back home he had to fight the gangs that overtook his neighbourhood. He had to take

up the role of a superhero to fight for justice for the innocents. These are all the echoes of the struggles that black people had to endure at that time.

Unfortunately, looking at the current cultural climate and the struggle non-whites in America are going through, one could argue not much has changed. Black people are exposed to police brutality on a weekly basis. A new viral video of a white policeman using excessive force on a black person is spread on the Internet almost instantly after it happens. That is why social justice movements had to evolve. BLM started as a hashtag on Twitter, and nowadays it is the biggest social justice movement in the world.

In a similar way the social rights movements evolved, so did black superheroes. The characters in movies analysed in this thesis have presented a good argument that black people are being presented more fairly and realistically than they were in the past. It could be argued that social change movements like BLM have enabled characters like Black Panther to get a fair representation. In return, the movie was a great success, and it only boosted the voice of black Americans in fight against systemic racism. This evolution of social justice movements is also witnessed by decentralisation of the movements. Instead of acting locally, they are working to be heard globally (which their start on the social media shows, too). And globally successful movies and TV shows only help this cause.

Moreover, representation of those who were voiceless for the longest time in the past seems to have evolved too. An homage to black teenagers who died too early due to people stereotyping them is a small, but important piece in the puzzle that representation of black people is. Changing the character's appearance to be closer to the "real" culture is also a positive in black representation. Giving the voice to "the Orient" and not speaking in its stead has resulted in black directors, writers and producers to be free in their creation. This is creating black culture and it cannot be denied any more.

Now that the historic context is already explained, future research in this field could include even more characters, comic books, films, TV shows or animated series and their influence on African-American culture. Additionally, the changes in the society could also be observed by examining the representation of female superheroes. This could provide a way of showing the connection between feminist movements and popular media depictions of women.

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