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# The Effects of Misrepresentation (2020-2021)

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# "The Effects of Misrepresentation" Miranda R. Cobo (research inquiry example)

## Questions to Consider For Discussion and Reflection

A research inquiry strives to enter a conversation through integrating, synthesizing, "speaking" with, and learning from sources. In this example of a research inquiry, Cobo works with sources that help to critique an assumption that the comic, *Black Panther,* is an example of a fully anti-racist representation of a superhero. As you read Cobo's essay, consider:

- Cobo starts from the history of the *Black Panther* comic and its white creators. How does this help to set up and frame the argument? What moves do you intend to make to set up your argument?
- According to the structure of Cobo's argument, why is just having a Black superhero not enough to be anti-racist or correct for issues of representation in comics? How does Cobo move through these sub-points?
- In the conclusion Cobo talks about future research and how to find sources in making a distinction between *Black Panther* the comic and the film. Why do you think this distinction is made? Could this suggest other future research on what makes comics and films different media with different purposes and audiences, even in examples where the film and comic are more similar? What else would you like to know about comics, race, and representation after reading this research inquiry?

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## The Effects of Misrepresentation by Miranda R. Cobo

*Abstract*

In the 1960s, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby introduced T'Challa, famously known as the Black Panther. He was the first black superhero to be introduced in the Marvel Universe and into popular American comics. The world that Black Panther lived in is very advanced and breaks the stereotype of the view that many Americans have on Africa. However, that is only one stereotype that it has worked against. There have been many other stereotypes that writers use in T'Challa's storyline that can be detrimental to making progress against racism. When creating black characters, many times they were not able to amount to the status that white characters have because of the lack of representation. Many authors have written about this topic trying to analyze why misrepresentation keeps happening and how it can be fixed. Through analysis and research, it is clear that there is still a long way to go in order for minorities to be properly portrayed in the media.

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When you think of classic comic book superheroes, who are the first characters that come to mind? Although there are probably a few names that could be recalled, some popular ones are Superman, Batman, Captain America, and so on. Besides being extremely powerful, other-worldly human beings, these three names have one big thing in common; they are all white men. This is not to say that there are not other popular superheroes of different races, but there is a

reason that only the white superheroes come first to mind when thinking of characters. It's because superheroes of other races are not properly represented in the media, such as comic books specifically. Minorities in the media tend to be underrepresented because white writers cannot relate to what this group of people are going through or understand their culture, in this case being *Marvel Comics'* character Black Panther.

The function of race in comics is to be inclusive, but when writers are not part of a particular minority community, their attempts at being inclusive do not always come across properly. Black Panther is a character that was created by authors Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. He was introduced in Marvel's *Fantastic Four* series as a new addition to the Marvel Universe back in the late 1960s. Black Panther, or T'Challa, is the king of Wakanda, an unknown, isolated country in Africa that was filled with unimaginable resources hidden from the rest of the world. When he was first introduced to the Fantastic Four, who are written as white superheroes, it was hard for them to fathom that Wakanda seemed to be much more advanced than America.

According to Adilifu Nama (2009), author of "Brave black world: black superheroes as science fiction ciphers," this drawing of T'Challa and Wakanda was almost "daring" because authors of popular comics in previous years were not seen to be writing about any other places being advanced apart from Western nations. Being that Lee and Kirby were both white men, it is surprising to see that they were able to make Wakanda and its people superior to the rest of the world.

However, it is not as progressive as it seems when analyzing his introduction. Throughout the issue, T'Challa is described as moving and acting like an animal, which goes with the assumptions that outsiders have about African people. It also undermines the status that T'Challa has when being viewed as a king because when he is described in that way, it is hard to take him seriously (Clarke, 2012). Although these authors are working to make an attempt at including more diversity, traces of what they believe in always manages to shine through.

When writers do get a chance to discuss African characters, they create a storyline based on racial movements to be relatable to readers or create a story of Africa that is conventional for them. Going back to the comic of *Fantastic Four* where Black Panther is first introduced, there were many issues going on in the world at the time. For example, the Cold War was a major event, the idea of isolationism, and political movements were created, one being the Black Panther Party, giving inspiration to the character. This was all done in an attempt to engage readers by using current events at the time, but Wakanda still came across as an image of colonialism. The concept of an "Imagined Africa" is brought up in Martin Lund's (2016) article, "Introducing the Sensational Black Panther." The "Imagined Africa" is the product of what white people have created in their minds of what they want Africa to be, rather than what it actually is. Marc Singer (2002), author of "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race," also discusses the fact that comics use generic, westernized ideologies of someone who fits the superhero status, and using outsiders from foreign lands were used to maintain the image America has of itself. After all, it was not until the white superheroes showed up that the Black Panther decided to share Wakanda's resources with the rest of the world. T'Challa was used to feed into the stories that Americans have created about Africa, and rather than Lee and Kirby breaking free from that, they stuck to what they were comfortable with. This is much easier for authors to do rather than really researching into the cultures of different races, and instead decide

that their one minority character makes up for the lack of minorities in the sea of white characters.

Black superheroes are created to take on the role of representing the whole black community, rather than the writers creating more minority characters. Matthew Facciani, Peter Warren, and Jennifer Vendemia (2015) did an analysis of how race functions in American comic books and what kind of role characters of different races are given in these stories. After doing a study of different popular comics, they found that 79% of protagonists were white males, and when characters of a different race are used, they are found to have less authority than the white male characters. They also found that the dominant buyers of comics were white men, which can explain why people of color are so underrepresented. Since comic book writers are trying to appeal to a certain demographic, characters of minority races are not used often, and when they are, they are used to be a representation of the whole race or are misrepresented. In fact, it was not uncommon to see comic books portray the "bad guys" as minorities in the universe the story was based in, often having different colored skin. This can impact how the readers views minorities in real life and can also feed into the stereotypes that exist in the world today. After Black Panther was first introduced, there have been many different *Black Panther* series published. The authors of *Black Panther* in the early 2000's, Reginald Hudlin and John Romita, wrote a story that was more inclusive by using black characters to fight alongside T'Challa. This had a different impact on readers, and emphasized Black Power in attempts to change the way that the public views black people (Feldman, 2007). However, Marvel will always have the underlying theme of white dominance, so even in this version of *Black Panther* soldiers from the United States were sent to Wakanda to help fight the battles that the Wakandans could not. This goes to show that many comic book writers are not taking the steps to create changes that would impact the way the media views minorities.

After reading through the different sources and analyzing them, it is clear that changes need to be made within the comic book world and media in general. The authors all have the similar viewpoint that minority characters, especially those who are black, are not represented properly which is damaging to the way society operates when it comes to minorities. Readers can subconsciously get the idea that white people (white *men* in particular) are superior. White readers will not be affected by this because it is not an issue to them. However, when someone who is black reads these comics, it is hard to feel seen when someone that looks like them is not represented in something as big as the Marvel Universe, for example. Once the media is able to understand the bigger role that they play in writing storylines like this, it will make them realize that more representation is needed. However, this does not mean one or two black characters here and there. It means they need to do proper research on different cultures so that they can properly curate storylines that are accurate to the race they are writing about. It may take some more time and require more work, but in order to create a more progressive world, it has to start with small things like comic books.

For future research with this topic, it is important to come in with an open mind and be ready to look through many articles. One struggle with finding sources pertaining to *Black Panther* comics is trying to avoid sources that are analyzing the film. The film and the comics have different storylines and messages, so it is important to focus on the comics only. When researching for this topic, make sure to not be extremely broad with the topics searched. The more specific the search is, the less amount of results will pop up, allowing your research to get more and more precise. This topic is something that everyone should be educated on so that as a

society, the misrepresentation of black and other minority communities can be fixed and improved.

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