Critique, Dialogue, and Action

Museum Representation in *Black Panther*

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■ **ABSTRACT:** In recent decades, the museum world has devoted time and resources to studying the opinions and actions of their visitors; however, it is much more difficult to access perspectives of a more general public that includes non-visitors. This article situates popular visual culture as a form of engagement between museum professionals and the public. By analyzing the museum scene of the Marvel Studios movie *Black Panther*, as well as responses to it, and then contextualizing these within the history and current events of the museum field, I identify ways in which popularly received visual culture can spur change in other cultural industries—creating productive critiques that can evolve into impactful dialogue and action to model responsive research and more inclusive museum practices.

■ **KEYWORDS:** controversy, equity, film studies, museum spaces, popular culture

The museum realm, encompassing both museum practice and the scholarly study of these institutions, shifts each decade with changing social and economic pressures. Museum professionals and scholars are at the forefront of these shifts, but do their concerns align with those of the general public, which is increasingly interested in the role of the museum as a resource but also as a shaper of cultural industry? In recent decades, society at large has looked more closely at the histories of institutions like museums and how those histories often intersect with issues of social and racial inequalities. Various groups such as Decolonize This Place have advocated for more substantial inclusivity, diversity, and equity in the museum realm, citing a multitude of examples where these qualities were and are lacking. In 2018, these critiques visually coalesced in a museum scene in the widely popular *Black Panther* movie of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. At less than five minutes of the two hours and fifteen minutes runtime, the scene nonetheless captured the attention of moviegoers and inspired conversations across racial, economic, and academic boundaries. Blockbuster movies can both reflect and influence broad societal values. In particular, popular culture—in this case, film—can benefit museum professionals by providing insight into perspectives on their institutions. These perspectives encompass both museum visitors and non-visitors, the latter of which are particularly valuable, as there has been comparatively little study of non-visitors and their views of museums. Movies such as *Black Panther* present strong critique, but, as this article will illustrate, these two cultural industries (movies

and museums) can converge productively to develop critique into dialogue, which ideally transforms into action.

Critique

Black Panther was received well both critically and popularly, situating it as a movie that is indicative of the cultural flows of its time. Notable in the Hollywood industry for its Black co-writers, Black director (one of the writers), and majority Black cast, it was the highest-grossing film of 2018 and received seven Academy Award nominations, winning three. It was nominated for best film in the People's Choice Awards and even though it did not win that distinction, the winning movie *Avengers: Infinity War* was an ensemble movie that included the main character of *Black Panther*, T'Challa. Additionally, two *Black Panther* cast members, the late Chadwick Boseman (T'Challa) and Danai Gurai (Okoye), won the People's Choice Awards for best male movie star and best action movie star, respectively.¹ The movie became the top grossing individual superhero movie to date. We can confidently say *Black Panther* had a strong positive reception among the general movie-going public. The movie revolves around the main character, T'Challa, assuming his father's position as king of the fictional African country Wakanda in the twenty-first century. An unexpected challenger to the throne comes in the form of his cousin, whose existence he discovers in the course of the movie. This cousin, Erik Stevens (Wakandan name N'Jadaka), alias Killmonger, was raised in the United States, orphaned at a young age and, it is insinuated, was lost in the system after being abandoned by his uncle, T'Challa's father, the king. While seemingly an age-old tale of power and familial struggles over a throne, the film explores deeper concepts that strike close to home in our modern times. The rifts created between parties in the movie are generally over isolationist political policies, diasporic communities, and a global colonial legacy. In this vein, there is even a pointed jab at the universal museum and its problematic histories.

The museum scene occurs early on and its position in the film's scene sequence connects it to the broader themes, mirroring the interconnectedness of museums and broader trends in societal groups, beliefs, and events. The movie opens with an animated sequence that illustrates the history of Wakanda and the Black Panther mantle, narrated from father to son (the movie's main character T'Challa). This scene establishes Wakanda as an alliance of four fictional African tribes (originally five before the first Black Panther was crowned king), developed many centuries ago and built around a meteorite deposit of a material called vibranium. As the story is narrated, the animation shows scenes of war and slavery happening right outside Wakanda's border. Within the vibranium-rich nation, advanced technology allows them to conceal their country and cultural and technological innovations. Throughout the colonial period, Wakanda remained isolated and in control of their peoples, lands, and resources. In short, they were untouched by the colonizing white European countries and the United States. Though the chaos of war and bloodshed is depicted around Wakanda in this scene, the loading of enslaved Africans aboard a ship takes up the majority of the screen's visual composition during this moment in the film, foreshadowing the prominent role that the effects of the Transatlantic Slave Trade will have in the movie. As T'Challa's father tells his son (and viewers), even in modern times Wakandans project their identity as a third-world country and hide the truth of their power, resources, and technology. Their way of life, predicated on extreme isolationist political policies, has continued through generations of Wakandan rulers.

Following this opening narrative, viewers find themselves in Oakland, California, in 1992. The scene in Oakland foregrounds, in stark contrast to the Wakanda just shown in the animation, a lack of technology and privilege—circumstances that are not uncommon in communities

affected by systemic racism. Children play basketball with a makeshift “hoop” made from a milk crate affixed to a rough piece of plywood. The apartment depicted is small, seemingly meticulously maintained, and organized with African objects and motifs dispersed throughout the space. Viewers later discover this is the childhood apartment of Killmonger, the cousin of the main character. On the television in the apartment, footage of the so-called 1992 Los Angeles Riots plays. These civil disturbances occurred in reaction to the acquittal of four Los Angeles police officers for the use of excessive force in the arrest of Rodney King. Though the use of excessive force and police brutality, largely from white law enforcement officials toward marginalized persons, has a long history, the police brutality against Rodney King was one of the first times such an event was not only videotaped but also widely broadcasted on television, providing concrete evidence of police brutality. In 2018, when *Black Panther* was released, police brutality continued to be an unresolved issue. Two years later, in 2020, protests against these injustices reached another flashpoint, making clear how relevant the references in the movie were and continue to be to twenty-first century audiences.

Inserting a reference to this civil unrest near the beginning of *Black Panther* further sets the scene of the inequities and injustices dealt to diasporic communities of African descent and the growing rebellion this fostered in certain groups—all key parts of Killmonger’s motivations. Every figure seen, whether in the apartment or playing pick-up basketball in the dilapidated lot outside the building, presents at first as African American mainly through accent, though the viewer soon finds out that at least two are Wakandan. Throughout the movie, this setting would be returned to visually and verbally, in memory and dialogue. In fact, what happens in that apartment, the killing of Killmonger’s father by his uncle the king, is a haunting legacy that continuously affects Wakanda negatively.² On the surface, the subsequent scene is about T’Challa retrieving his romantic interest and friend Nakia to attend his coronation, yet it too centers the narrative on modern struggles of Black communities, this time Black Africans. Nakia is on a mission to save a group of women who have been abducted—a reference to real-life Boko Haram abductions, with the screenplay designating the women as Nigerian and the location notated as Chibok, an area where one of the infamous abductions occurred.³ After arranging for the abducted women to return home, T’Challa and his entourage likewise return to their home, Wakanda. These scenes are examples of the struggles of non-Wakandan Africans and those of African descent, a recurring theme of the movie, that lay the foundation for the museum scene that follows.

The museum sequence directly following captured the attention of audiences and critics. As written in the screenplay and indicated by the sign and notational text in the exterior shot, the setting is the fictional Museum of Great Britain in London, an unsubtle reference to the world-renowned British Museum and thus the universal museum as a type (Coogler and Cole n.d.: 14). In terms of *Black Panther* and this article, a universal museum, sometimes called an encyclopedic museum, refers to museums that have a collection of objects that spans the globe. The significance of this reference in *Black Panther* lies in the history of such museums. The early development of the universal museum stems from practices of collecting and collection displays of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.⁴ Although many royal and aristocratic collections became museums, *Wunderkammer* (German for cabinets of curiosity) were forerunners to museums in that, through them, collectors often attempted to create a sense of the world’s order—in contrast to the aristocratic collections created to suit personal taste. *Wunderkammer* were not limited to the aristocratic class, but could be created by non-aristocratic men of means. Of course, this meant that collections were generally amassed and controlled by those of higher socio-economic status. The transformation from private collections into museums and galleries to which the public ostensibly had access is entangled with the histories of social, economic, and political privilege and power.

While collectors had always been those with the means, time, and education to accumulate and retain items of interest, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the state-sponsored colonial enterprises of Europe further shifted the nature of collections and contributed to the establishment of public museums (Bennett 2004; Bennett et al. 2014; Thomas et al. 2016). Colonizers' expeditions studied and collected objects globally from Indigenous cultures. The acquisition of objects in this manner was fraught with (sometimes explicitly violent) conflict and uneven power dynamics.⁵ Museum collections and displays were frequently used to legitimize such expeditions, whose goals were generally touted as "scientific" classification and understanding, the edification of the public, and the preservation of humankind's history. The universal museum was and continues to be the physical face of colonial collecting—and its associated trauma (Hicks 2020). Although abolitionist, liberation, and civil rights movements progressed from the nineteenth century on, certain museum practices for exhibition and display retained aspects of its problematic beginnings. Since museums are situated as existing for the public, this public—growing ever more informed and, in the case of marginalized communities, not only voiced but heard—increasingly provides feedback in the form of critique such as that embodied in the action movie *Black Panther*.

The exterior museum shot references the British Museum and its colonial legacy. However, it was actually filmed at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, which has made conscious—and successful—efforts to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion at their institution (Halperin 2017). To a viewer with this knowledge, the conceptual contrast between these institutions lends even more significance to the following events. The scene shows a white woman, who appears to be the museum's curator of African art, approaching Erik Stevens, aka Killmonger (the supposed antagonist), in the African galleries.⁶ Multiple security officers hover in the gallery around Killmonger, "slightly unnerved," as the screenplay indicates (Coogler and Cole n.d.: 15). He greets her: "They tell me you're the expert." He proceeds to question her about the objects in the display cases. She seems at ease answering the questions, appearing as the "expert," until Killmonger asks about what appears to be a mining tool. She describes it as an object from the Benin culture and he corrects her: "It was taken by British soldiers in Benin but it's from Wakanda and it's made out of vibranium. Don't trip, I'mma take it off your hands for you" (Coogler and Cole n.d.: 16). Disturbed, the curator informs Killmonger that the objects are not for sale. Killmonger's colonial reference that follows is assuredly not benign. Rather, it is a confrontation of history in a modern setting. "How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it like they took everything else?" He calls out the curator—indeed, the universal museum type—on the problematic histories of objects collected from colonized areas by colonizing countries and their institutions.⁷ Viewers again see the thematic thread—the pervasive impacts of colonialism and power imbalances—that underpins the classic vying-for-the-throne narrative. The previous two scenes humanized the struggles of modern Black Africans and Black Americans. These two scenes are bookended with the opening narrative of the history of Wakanda and the museum scene, emphasizing the historic suffering of Africans under colonial invasion. The opening narrative illustrates this suffering through direct representation while the museum scene uses the objects that were removed beyond cultural borders as a mnemonic device for historical trauma. Through sequencing, these opening scenes start with history, then explore its modern-day effects, and loop back to history but through the modern lens.

In addition to this strategic sequencing, these short, symbolically packed minutes in *Black Panther* reference the significant challenges facing museums as they wade through their colonial pasts and present with issues such as repatriation discussions. In the dialogue between the curator and Killmonger, the reference to colonial expeditions of Africa may seem relatively

benign; however, the curator's line about the mining tool being a Benin work is almost surely the writers referencing the "Benin Expedition of 1897." This is a rather misleading name for a British-led invasion of Benin City characterized by extensive burning and looting, as evidenced by the pervasive dispersal of cultural objects (estimated at more than 10,000) such as the "Benin Bronzes" to museums in Europe and the United States. Museums with these Benin works include the British Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum as explored ("excavated") in archaeologist and curator Dan Hicks' recent volume *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (2020).⁸ In this book, Hicks meticulously presents the violent and traumatic history of these Benin objects, situating their provenance—as well as the arguments for and against their repatriation—within a web of colonial violence, imperialism, and capitalism. These Benin Bronzes have been the subject of repatriation controversies for years. While the issue of repatriation in general was foregrounded with the new museology of the 1980s, the debate has continued relatively unresolved in the decades since, with museums often dealing with repatriation on a case-by-case basis. Legislation and professional museum organization guidelines have contributed to the debate. For example, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and import/export laws have standardized current museum acquisition as well as the reassessment of objects of Native American origin in the United States. Organizations such as the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM), among others, have repeatedly discussed the topic of repatriation as well as the general ethics of museums. Certain high-profile museums remain staunch in their perspectives with their directors weighing in vocally on the pros of a universal museum and often against repatriation. In a 2019 article, Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp and Chris Wingfield outline the public and institutional responses regarding a Benin Bronze held by the University of Cambridge's Jesus College (Zetterstrom-Sharp and Wingfield 2019). The article relates how the original 2016 vote of the students at Jesus College to return the bronze work to Nigeria was undermined by a variety of factors, including the influence of high-profile museums such as the British Museum with concerns about precedent for its own Benin Bronzes.

In cases such as those pertaining to the Benin Bronzes, universal museums argue that without their collection of such cultural treasures, the objects would have been irreversibly damaged or even lost to the vagaries of time and circumstance. Additional arguments include the promotion of inter-cultural/international understanding as a way of contributing to global peace and collaboration. There is also arguable value to making cultural objects available to people who may not have the ability or means to travel the world, though it is undeniable that historical forces have made non-white-dominant cultures and objects of great quality and significance available to audiences, particularly white ones, in Europe and the United States/Canada without the opposite holding true (Paquette 2020; Sarr and Savoy 2018).⁹ Priceless objects of European and Euro-American cultures are generally not globally distributed in Central and South American, African, Middle Eastern, and/or Asian museums. Yet recent developments seem to be shifting the tide in the controversies of repatriation. In November 2019, Jesus College announced the decision to return the bronze work in their collection to Nigeria. After more than a decade of discussions among the Benin Dialogue Group, Germany agreed in April 2021 that they will begin repatriating their own collection of Benin Bronzes, the second largest in the world, in 2022 and they will subsequently be housed in the new Royal Museum in Benin City (Birnbbaum 2021). The topic of repatriation has enough history and material to fill several books, but the significance of universal museums and repatriation in relation to this article lies in *Black Panther's* direct and indirect references to them. Further significance is relayed in the great popularity of this movie in general and the particular scene that addresses this. In other words, it is the inclusion of these topics in popular films and the audience's resultant fascination with such scenes that indicates

the topics' pervasiveness among society, encompassing even the average US movie-goer, who may or may not also be a museum-goer.

Further reference to colonial histories is found in Killmonger's heist partner, Ulysses Klaue. In contrast to his Nazi background in the comics, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Klaue was born in the Netherlands and spent much of his adult life in South Africa. His cinematic biography symbolically mirrors the white Dutch colonization of southern Africa, much of which is part of the modern-day Republic of South Africa, which still has a white population of Dutch descendants. In *Black Panther*, Klaue comes across to viewers as having a heavy Afrikaans accent. Afrikaans, one of the official languages of South Africa, is derived from the Dutch language and can be a marker of an Afrikaner (usually a descendent of seventeenth-century Dutch or Huguenot settler-colonizers). Klaue's biography and accent further highlights the colonial histories of the African continent. The character of Klaue in the movie embodies the worst of white colonizers with brutal greed as a defining personality trait and his desire for the material and monetary fortunes of Wakanda mirroring the base motivations for historical colonization of Africa. Upending the historical narrative, Killmonger uses Klaue by exploiting these qualities and once Klaue has served his purpose, Killmonger kills him—one more way to reinforce the consistent motivations of Killmonger to rise against oppressors, with Klaue as a physical representation of a long line of oppressors.

In addition to calling out museums' problematic roots in colonialism, this relatively short scene references a variety of issues in the museum field. One such issue is the ethnic makeup of museum employees, specifically the general racial homogeneity of certain careers. The employees in the gallery, four security officers and the curator, are white-presenting, in contrast to the museum-goers, who display a range of racial identities. These characters are shown to be power-holders, either physical or intellectual, at the museum. Portrayed in the movie as a cog in the heist culmination of the museum scene, Killmonger's Black lover Linda infiltrates the museum in a service position in the museum café, providing a symbolic snapshot of the contrasting racial demographics between curatorial/management staff and service staff, as University of Texas Director of Art Galleries at Black Studies Lise Ragbir notes in an opinion piece for *Hyperallergic* (Ragbir 2018). Upper-level museum positions, like many roles within intellectual employment, were historically filled by white people. Though anti-discrimination laws have come into place with the civil rights activism of the past fifty years, seemingly introducing more employment possibilities for people of color, data indicates that racial inequity in museum positions still exists.¹⁰ Most especially, upper-level management and intellectual positions are usually filled by majority non-Hispanic white persons, while so-called lower-level positions such as service roles are much more evenly split. In a survey of art museum staff demographics published in 2015, eighty-four percent of the staff in job categories that include curators, conservators, educators, and leadership self-identified as non-Hispanic white, a group that accounted for sixty-two percent of the US population at the time (Schonfeld et al. 2015). In contrast, only four percent of people in these positions self-identified as Black, a demographic that continues to average about thirteen percent of the overall US population. The choice to cast the museum employees shown in the galleries in *Black Panther* as all white highlights the inequity inherent in the field when it comes to underrepresented groups accessing the training and opportunities that would afford them upper-level positions in these institutions. The film not only reflects the racial imbalances in museum employment, but further reveals intellectuals as potential gatekeepers of knowledge. In *Black Panther*, the curator's dismissal of Killmonger's knowledge about the hammer hints at how institutional training can be used to discredit source community experts who are often cultural insiders, if academic outsiders, especially with regard to museum objects acquired during colonial encounters.

The *Black Panther* movie further indicts museums as non-welcoming spaces—not just for employees, but for visitors of color. As the museum curator enters the West-African gallery to meet Killmonger, movie viewers can see three security officers already triangulated around Killmonger. If the audience happened to miss this, Killmonger points it out through his dialogue when he confronts the curator. “You got all this security watching me ever since I walked in” (Coogler and Cole n.d.: 16). This line—the scene in general—references the issue of racial profiling, or the use of visible markers of race or ethnicity as grounds for suspicion of a person or persons. As the American Civil Liberties Union states in their material and on their website, racial profiling is still a pervasive problem in the United States. It may be argued, however, that the problem is especially prominent in historically white spaces.

As shown throughout the history of museums, especially universal museums, such spaces were historically white, meaning that ease of access was extended to the white community (even if originally the privileged white community) without welcome to—indeed, with purposeful exclusion of—communities of color. In Marilyn Hood’s 1983 study on criteria in choosing leisure-time activities and how that relates to museum-visiting, she found that of those who were occasional or not-at-all museum-goers, the reasoning was that some of their primary criteria would not be fulfilled (Hood 1983). Primary considerations of how to spend leisure time included, along with a few other things, feeling at ease in a space. This aligns with more recent studies on the demographics of museum-goers, particularly of art museums. In 2008, the National Endowment for the Arts conducted a Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, which included a look at art museum and gallery attendance. The detailed analysis of this component showed not only that “non-Hispanic white Americans were over-represented among adult museum visitors” but also that the gap had widened since previous studies in 1992 (Farrell and Medvedeva 2010b: 58; 2010a). That is to say, underrepresented ethnic and racial groups had become increasingly less likely to attend art museums and galleries.

Considering Hood’s earlier research on leisure-time criteria in combination with the statistics, it seems clear that museum spaces, particularly those of art museums, are often non-welcoming to communities of color. While various factors contribute to this, including the institution’s history as a white space, certain behaviors both conscious and unconscious on behalf of the museum can hamper the inclusivity of an institution. Racial profiling is one such behavior. In May 2019 there was extensive national reporting on an incident at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. A group of seventh-grade students from the Helen Y. Davis Leadership Academy Charter Public School of Dorchester, Massachusetts, reported experiencing racial profiling and racist behavior from patrons and staff. The security officers allegedly followed the students, children of color, from gallery to gallery, remaining hyper-vigilant around them while seeming to be simultaneously lax with white student groups. As many media outlets conveyed, a museum staff member reportedly told students: “No food, no drink, and no watermelon” (Connor 2019), drawing on a constructed racial stereotype connecting Black Americans and watermelon that dates back to the nineteenth century. With these and other reported actions, the students were made to feel unwelcome and threatened due to their race.

In *Black Panther*, the higher than normal presence of security around one Black man captures this policing of visitors based on racial profiling. At the time, as far as the audience knows, Killmonger was standing and viewing objects—certainly not threatening behavior and completely normal in a museum setting. In the end, the curator and the security officers die per Killmonger’s heist plans, symbolizing early his later intent to use force against white oppressors. This scene unapologetically confronts viewers and the museum world about problematic pasts that live today in institutionalized settings. Time and again, museums have had difficulty reckoning with problematic histories because the norms of the institution do not offer a framework,

vocabulary, or alternative to dealing with their colonial present (Stoler 2011; Zetterstrom-Sharp and Wingfield 2019).

The *Black Panther* movie presents a complex look at people, places, and institutional histories. It complicates ideas of hero and villain, building nuanced portrayals of almost all the characters. The main hero's father and best friend undergo a layering of such depth. First shown as "good," even if just through association with main character and thus hero T'Challa, the narrative reveals increasingly disturbing information and objectionable actions, both past (in relation to T'Challa's father T'Chaka) and present (for T'Challa's friend W'Kabi). Likewise, the character M'Baku, who is originally portrayed as a background antagonist desiring the throne of Wakanda early in the film, later becomes a source of support for T'Challa. Killmonger, supposedly the villain, is shown to have been a victim of injustices and in large part a product of circumstance and environment. The museum scene near the beginning of the movie underlined the motivations for this character, who critiques and wants to overturn systemic injustices. The popularity of the movie and particularly of Erik Stevens/Killmonger's character is revealing. The audience, despite feeling compelled to root for T'Challa, who is clearly depicted as the heroic main character, cannot help but empathize with T'Challa's rival. While the viewer is supposed to find Killmonger's actions abhorrent, the narrative encourages the development of empathy for his motivations.

The reactions to the movie and Killmonger's character indicate that a large part of the general public no longer views institutions through rose-colored lenses but acknowledges their often problematic, complicated histories and systems—in fact, actively critiques them and yearns for progress. In the movie, the white museum staff act as stand-ins for the white colonial powers and the lasting systems that have contributed to the oppression of peoples of color. Per the 2018 *Black Panther* movie, the museum, specifically the *universal* museum, in broad public perception is, at best, an institution that must receive justifiable critique to improve or, at worst, a colonial relic that perpetuates power imbalances and should be treated as such.

Dialogue and Action

The impact of this movie's great success, smashing box office estimates, has been called the "*Black Panther* effect" for foiling the common justification that the lack of Black-led or Black majority cast Hollywood movies is because they would not be profitable. Beyond the filmmaking industry, the effects of the museum scene in *Black Panther* are still to be fully discovered. In future years, through hindsight, we may gain better insight, but even now, only a few years since its release, one may wonder at possible connections between extremely vocal public outcries and the scene, which concretely represents many issues of which marginalized communities were already aware. One such example occurred in late March of 2018, a little more than a month after the initial theater release and popular success of *Black Panther*, when the Brooklyn Museum hired a new African art curator, Kristen Windmuller-Luna, who is white. There was a fervor of public criticism leveled at the museum for the decision, all revolving around the lack of diversity in upper-level museum positions, the perceived (and too-often very real, historically and in modern times) gatekeeping of non-white cultural objects and information by white academics, and the white-dominant systems of education and structures of public institutions (Salam 2018; Greenberger 2018). The specific case of the Brooklyn Museum's hiring of a white female curator of African art seemed symbolic of a longer history of racial marginalization in art museums, mentioned previously. Coming so close on the heels of the enormously popular movie, the hiring of Windmuller-Luna was likely so inflammatory partially because of the lingering and

pervasive discontents that manifested very publicly in Killmonger and the museum scene just a month prior.

Also in March 2018, the French President Emmanuel Macron appointed economist Felwine Sarr and art historian Bénédicte Savoy to assess possible restitution in relation to objects from former French colonies mainly within the collection of the Musée du quai Branly. In November of the same year, Sarr and Savoy submitted their report, now known as the Sarr-Savoy report (Sarr and Savoy 2018). In his 2020 article on the report, reactions to it, and results (or lack thereof), Jonathan Paquette points out that almost all aspects relating to this process were highly mediatized (Paquette 2020). While the recommendations of Sarr and Savoy have, to date, been much criticized and only partially heeded (with similarities to original reactions to the case studied by Zetterstrom-Sharp and Wingfield), the attention it received in world news sources points to the widened venue for these discussions. Though we cannot currently know with certainty if there is a direct correlation between the widely discussed *Black Panther* museum scene and the significance of the Sarr-Savoy report in world news media outlets, both indicate the keen interest of the public in issues of cultural heritage, colonial pasts, and ethical collecting practices. In addition to the Windmuller-Luna hiring or the Sarr-Savoy report, in future years, further events, actions, or movies may fall under the umbrella of the “*Black Panther* effect.” Certainly, the critique that the blockbuster film leveled at museums opened conversations in relatively accessible platforms about difficult topics in certain arenas.

The movie, the national and international publicizing of problematic incidents, and the subsequent amplification of well-informed critical voices have the potential to become productive when critique begins to shift to dialogue. For this to occur, however, museums must be listening to societal voices from every direction, including popular culture. Yet dialogue can too often be a curtain behind which an institution hides its inaction. As Zetterstrom-Sharp and Wingfield discuss in relation to the aforementioned Benin Bronze case at Jesus College, institutional structure and influence restricted open dialogue, and the ensuing discussions with select and controlled participants originally resulted mainly in inaction, which often characterizes the empty rhetoric of a corporate approach to systemic inequities and more specifically colonial legacies still active in institutions today (Zetterstrom-Sharp and Wingfield 2019). The *Black Panther* movie had the immensely popular and culturally pervasive Marvel franchise behind it so that museums had no way to ignore its relevancy. Indeed, even the British Museum responded to the movie scene, situating itself as a space for dialogue. Like many institutions, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts are being touted by a variety of museums of late, though for some it has not gone beyond rhetoric to impactful action. Still, as evidenced by the strong 2020 global protests of police brutality and systemic racism with the resulting prominence of discussions in both academic and mainstream media, the public grows ever weary of words without action. Published in 2020, Hicks’ book on the objects looted from Benin is an explicit call to action from museums that moves “beyond the dominant mode of ‘reflexivity’ and self-awareness in museum thinking, which often amounts to little more than a kind of self-regard” (Hicks 2020: xiii). In fact, he strongly urges an approach to cultural restitution that is collaborative and dismantles, reimagines, and rebuilds the “museum” as an institution.

Even before the urgency of the 2020 protests, some institutions and organizations were reflecting and responding. On a broader professional level, organizations such as the International Council of Museums are developing verbiage that more clearly addresses many of the issues that *Black Panther* critiqued. In a session in the summer of 2019, the Executive Board of ICOM proposed a new, more comprehensive definition of the museum institution, which addresses in some way the fraught histories of museums and their resultant responsibilities to the public:

Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing (ICOM).

While the proposed definition is still arguable in some ways and was certainly controversial in some circles (instigating a broader process of redefinition still ongoing within ICOM structured as “consultations,” the most recent of which passed in April 2021), its differences in comparison to the current official ICOM definition written in 2007 are significant. The 2007 definition reads:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment (ICOM).

This standing definition does not address the history of the institution nor the challenges museums and museum-goers face today, in large part due to that history. In short, it is the blinkered definition that *Black Panther* critiques within about five minutes of screen time. The 2019 definition was proposed about a year and a half after the debut of *Black Panther*. While we cannot explicitly draw concrete connections, the proposed definition seems to respond to critiques amplified in the museum scene and acknowledges the ways in which museums are connected to past, present, and future conflicts and systemic challenges. In these ways and likely more, *Black Panther* responded to the dissatisfaction of the communities regarding equity in relation to museum institutions during the 2010s and simultaneously shaped the forward trajectory of those discussions, drawing them further into the spotlight of a broad public that includes both museum visitors and non-visitors. Both the film—through the voice of Killmonger and the subsequent nuanced understandings T’Challa gained—and the public have pushed against the historic boundaries of institutions, calling for dialogue and action to be paired in order to truly transform them into inclusive and diverse socio-cultural cornerstones.

Conclusion

The overlaps between the museum world (practice and study) and the movie industry’s portrayal of it are often timely, revealing much about the museum institution and the public’s perception of it—as shown in the visual and contextual analyses of this article. Similar to popular culture, museum theory and practice are driven by *and* exert influence upon social, political, and cultural concerns. Many, but not all, museums are working toward equity and inclusion, though at times slowly with obvious and, through social media, well-broadcasted stumbles. These efforts have, in some cases, been going on for decades. Yet with a general US public that is increasingly educated on issues of race and inequity, especially younger generations, the heightened societal awareness of systemic injustices has arguably moved at a faster rate than the progress of museums. This reality is likely the root of the dismal portrayal of the museum in *Black Panther*, which highlights the negatives (past and present) of museum culture without touching on positives.¹¹ Obviously, the format of a film has concerns of time, narrative thrust, and reflecting dominant

contemporaneous concerns. And clearly, the museum issues that *Black Panther* relates are not only relevant and valid, but also more pressing than acknowledging the potential benefits of a museum in modern societies, especially as funding justification is even more urgent in light of economic impacts from the 2020 pandemic. Beyond that, though, *Black Panther*'s representation of the museum world is a sign of the general public's dissatisfaction with the status quo and their desire for more progress in making museums welcoming to all communities. The manifestations of these concerns in popular movies, of which *Black Panther* is just one recent example, is a resource that as yet has not fully been tapped to enhance our understanding of modern-day circumstances and opinions.

Being aware of the ways that museum practice, museum study, and (popular) cultural production and reception are interwoven can help museums keep their finger on the pulse of society and use critical analyses of this interplay to improve their functions, impacts, and identities. In particular, critiques leveled through the lens of popular culture can (and often should) be transformed into dialogue paired with action. Analyzing *Black Panther*, especially in combination with real-life examples and data, one can see that despite institutional efforts and statements to the contrary, museum institutions are generally not perceived as a welcoming space to communities of color. The film intimates that this is due in part to its historical roots but also because of the continuing slant toward whiteness and the role of the institution in upholding white-dominant culture. References to both are paralleled in the real world in data points and nationally reported incidents that might seem anecdotal if not for the frequency and similarity of them. Studying these pop culture representations and their reception can provide important insights into the effectiveness of museum efforts as well as the absence of efforts desired by broader publics. The tremendous connection that viewers felt to the issues raised by the museum scene points to the value of using popularly received works to improve the museum institution in concrete, actionable ways. Such studies of movies and museums, both sites of cultural production and reception, can provide the museum world with a space for reflection, dialogue, and action, but also with a look into the far-reaching cultural and imaginative impacts of the museum.

Acknowledgments

The input of art historian Emily Cornish in the form of conversations and commentary has been invaluable to the development of this article. The mentorship of Drs. Kevin Carr and Raymond Silverman during the project also enriched the product, as did the astute feedback from art historian Katharine Campbell. Many thanks also to the two anonymous reviewers.

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NOTES

1. The (E!) People's Choice Awards has been going on since 1975. Until 2005, the results were taken from Gallup polls of unlimited choice. In 2005, the process switched to an online voting system with nominations decided on by a web/media research company with use of various processes in the years since the switch to online voting.
2. In a chapter of his 2020 book, film and literature studies scholar Okaka Opio Dokotum addresses the many things that *Black Panther* got right in depicting Black people outside of Hollywood's racial stereotypes, as well as the few aspects of the film that still partake in a longer history of stereotypical depictions of Africans and those of African descent, some connected to this scene in Los Angeles (Dokotum 2020).
3. Boko Haram is a militant, extremist Islamic terrorist group based in Nigeria. In 2014, Boko Haram militants abducted 276 Nigerian schoolgirls from Chibok. Three years later, in 2017, 110 Nigerian schoolgirls from Dapchi were abducted by the same group.
4. If we were to trace a longer history of the museum institution, we could look much further into the past. However, the development of museums as we know them today began in earnest during these centuries.
5. The acquisition of objects from colonized cultures has a complex and varied history. Some objects were taken by force. Some objects have an unclear provenance. Still others were purchased or excavated with permissions, though even such seemingly legitimate purchases or excavations were often completed in circumstances that today would be ethically dubious. Due to uneven power dynamics between colonizing peoples and colonized peoples, objects and permits could be sold or given out of fear, desperation, or the desire to be viewed as an equal or at least higher up the social rankings. At times, Indigenous peoples could have also had more immediate pressing concerns (safety, sustenance, etc.) than tracking the exportation of cultural items. There could certainly have been acquisitions that were legitimate and ethical even in today's views, but the colonial context that we understand even more clearly with hindsight makes the movement of objects into public and private collections a complicated and controversial topic. All of this is further complicated by the nature of early, "pre-colonial" transactions as outlined by anthropologist and museum curator and director Nicholas Thomas (Thomas 1991; Thomas et al. 2016).
6. In the screenplay, she is identified as "museum director" (Coogler and Cole n.d.: 15), but on screen without any specific designation she comes across more as a curator. Or it is possible that, to the eye of a museum novice, a director and curator do not differ substantially. As has been pointed out, this scene is unrealistic in two main ways. First, a curator/director would not be likely to meet a random member of the public, especially without an appointment; and second, a curator/director would not drink in the museum galleries. Art historian Aruna D'Souza brings this up to illustrate the contrast between what the ideal parameters of the depicted profession are and what actions of people in these professions can sometimes reveal instead. A curator curates objects. The term curate stems from the Latin *cura*, which means, "to care for." In showing the curator/director as bringing a drink into the galleries, she is visually represented as having a lack of care for the objects and thus a lack of professional integrity and personal ethics. Overall, rather than being a "Hollywood mistake," D'Souza posits that the coffee is thoughtfully used as a stand-in for this lack of care of objects, professional integrity, personal ethics, and possibly more (D'Souza 2018).
7. If we read this scene interpreting the white woman as the museum director (following the screenplay notations), the interaction takes on even more valence: a confrontation with the universal museum director who serves as the face of such institutions and thus spokesperson advocating for collection and largely against repatriation. In the main text of this article, I have chosen to focus on a reading of this female figure as a curator since, outside the screenplay, which the average person would not read, there is no indication of her being a museum director. Additionally, while it is highly unlikely that a curator of an institution this size would meet with a random member of the public (especially, as it is implied, unscheduled), it is perhaps even more unlikely that a director would.
8. This incident is much more complex, but in relation to this article suffice to say that Benin was a culture advanced in ways that outright belied the propagated stance of colonizers that colonized

cultures were primitive and in need of colonizers' civilizing influence. This "punitive" expedition not only destroyed a strong kingdom and garnered valuable treasures for British collectors, but it also destroyed the magnificent Benin royal palace that stood as a physical reminder of the flimsy paternalistic reasoning that colonizers attempted to use in their oppression of "non-Western" communities.

9. Art historian James Cuno has written in support of the universal museum (Cuno et al. 2011; Cuno 2014), especially encapsulated in his 2011 book. As president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust and former director of the Harvard Art Museums, the Courtauld Institute, and the Art Institute of Chicago, he has/had a stake in such an argument. The book material was crafted during his final years as a museum director for the AIC, an encyclopedic museum itself. An astute review of his book, acknowledging both the positives and negatives of Cuno's work, was written by a then-graduate student three years later (Steiger 2014). The brief statement "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums," put forth by a group of universal museum directors and published in 2004 in *ICOM News*, positions the benefits of a universal museum while glossing over the harms it may, even today, perpetrate on marginalized communities.
10. This varies depending on type of museum. Race and ethnicity museums are more likely to have diverse staff. On the other end of the spectrum are museums that routinely struggle with diversity, especially in upper level positions, such as art museums. The museum institution as a whole, however, skews toward a white-majority staff.
11. I say this without criticism.

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