Sydney Carim

Prof. Hsieh

Images of Africa

4 October 2019

The Relative Truth

Black Panther was the most highly anticipated movie release of 2018. Its all-black cast and predominantly black production team made this superhero movie the first of its kind. Finally, a black actor would be taking the lead role rather than portraying the sidekick. Finally, African and African-American children could look up at the silver screen and see a powerful character that looked just like them. *Black Panther* was instrumental in diversifying film and representing the African population, inspiring hope that more films like this were to come. Although the casting of the film was an integral part of its impact and importance, *Black Panther* does much more than just bring Africa and African stars into the spotlight. By using Edward Said's concept of Orientalism as a lens through which to view the movie, the underlying complexities of the film are made clear. Understanding Orientalism as a means through which to orient oneself on the world stage and as possessing a rich history of Western dominance and power allows one to view truth as relative. Once this idea is established, it elucidates the true purpose of the film: to challenge the idea of one single story and to help the world imagine a new narrative, one born out of freedom and self-determination rather than systemic dominance and oppression.

Edward Said, author of *Orientalism*, describes Orientalism as a method of orienting oneself on the world stage through the creation of an "other." In Said's analysis, Europe took the role of the "Occident" by exoticizing Eastern countries as "Orient." In this binary relationship, the West became the dominant, masculine power, making the East the feminine submissive. This

"basic distinction between East and West [became the] starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient" (2). These theories, works and political opinions came about as a result of colonialism. As Said explains, colonialism and the political power of the Western world was what allowed for the creation of Orientalism in the first place, and their continued dominance then perpetuated Orientalist ideas for centuries to come. Although Orientalism may seem like a narrative based solely on stereotypes and myths of the East created by the West, that is not true. Rather than being simply "expressive of some nefarious 'Western' imperialist plot to hold down the 'Oriental' world, [it is] a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic [and other] texts; it is an *elaboration* … of a basic geographical distinction" (12). In other words, Orientalism cannot simply be a collection of fallacies, for it is rooted in the geography and history of colonialism. It is rooted in the actions of white colonizers against those they saw as "other," inferior beings that had to be taken over, suppressed, and taught what was "right" and what was "cultured." Because the West possessed greater power, it consequently possessed the ability to formulate the widespread "knowledge" and "truth" of their dominance and the East's inferiority, therefore writing it into history. Looking at the film *Black Panther* with a basic understanding of Orientalism and its founding principles gives the viewer a more interpretive viewpoint that allows for deeper analysis of the film, as well as its goals and impacts.

   Black Panther exemplifies the idea of "othering" that can be found within the concept of Orientalism. Rather than the West othering the East, as described in Said's book, here the audience sees the West othering Africa. White characters in the film look to their Western/European ethnicity to orient themselves, and by orienting themselves globally, they see their place of origination as superior to others and therefore place people of a foreign land—in

this case the African continent—within an inherently inferior status. This way of thinking leads to a binary relationship that causes widespread misunderstanding and division. However, the binary relationship that occurs as a result of othering is not simply built upon a collection of myths—looking at *Black Panther* with Orientalism as a lens allows one to see how the history of colonialism greatly impacted the story. One scene within the film that does a particularly good job of exemplifying this is the scene in which Agent Ross, a United States citizen, is seeing Wakanda for the first time. He wakes up after being healed of a bullet wound to the spine and is dumbfounded by his surroundings. His argument with Shuri, a Wakandan, emphasizes how it had become the West's truth that Africa was inferior. Agent Ross exclaims "Bullet wounds don't just magically heal overnight," to which Shuri responds "They do here. Just not by magic, by technology" (1:09:38-1:09:52). When looking at this through Said's point of view, one can see how the political power of America and the West in general had a big influence on how this conversation came to be. The history that the West had written for the world led Ross to think that what he was surrounded by couldn't possibly be real. Because of the fact that he was in Africa, the place that he had been taught was always inferior to America, he has difficulty understanding how an African country could be more technologically advanced than America. Even when he is told that the place he is standing in, the place that had healed him, is Wakanda, he remains confused for a few moments, unable to see past the preconceived notions he had adopted in the West to the reality in front of him. The history of colonialism and centuries of people being taught that Africa is an inherently inferior place is what leads to this moment. The "othering" and dumbing down of Africa to one single story by Western people hoping to orient themselves as superior is what allows this conversation to take place.

This scene also exemplifies a supplementary idea of Orientalism, one that helps to illuminate the complexities of *Black Panther*: the idea that the opinions of those in power become everyone's truth. Said claims that history does not just develop naturally as events occur, but that "men make their own history, and what they can know is what they have made" (3). However, not all people have the privilege to make their own history. Political power and economic dominance allows only certain people's views to become everyone's truth, and it is this relationship between power and what the majority discerns to be the truth that makes the truth relative rather than an absolute. The effects of this phenomenon can cause widespread misunderstanding and misrepresentation, as one can observe in *Black Panther.* After Agent Ross and Shuri's conversation, he walks to the window and is awestruck by what he sees. In this moment of realization, the camera zooms out and then stops. Within this frame is Ross, dwarfed by African technology. He is surrounded by darkness, but rather than this darkness having a negative connotation, it is a symbol for progress and power. As Ross is standing there, he is realizing that what he had believed about Africa for his entire life is wrong. He is understanding that the history he had been told and the knowledge he had been fed was wrong. And as he is gazing at the wondrous production of African power and African intellect, he is coming to the understanding that the truth is relative. He is beginning to understand the inherent connection between knowledge and power, and how the power one holds influences which stories get written into history and which get left behind. This frame, though brief, symbolizes the beginning of the breaking down of centuries of colonial history in which truth is absolute. It exemplifies the connection between truth and power, both in how it can be dangerous, and how the realization of its existence can be revolutionary. Said's explanation of Orientalism allows

viewers of *Black Panther* to understand the implications of this scene, as well as how the film has a complexity that achieves more than just bringing Africa and African stars to the spotlight.

Once the viewer understands that the truth is relative, the purpose of the film becomes clear. Rather than allowing the single story of those that dominate to perpetuate, *Black Panther* aims to help us imagine and bring into reality a new and previously undervalued narrative. By taking traditional African culture and weaving it into the film, the audience sees Africa portrayed in an entirely new light. Every time a Wakandan character is depicted, the audience sees designs and fabrics of Accra and Maasai communities as symbolic of beauty and strength rather than eccentricity and primitivism. Each time the characters speak Xhosa, the viewers hear the knowledge and wisdom within the words of the official language of South Africa. As these scenes and conversations play out, traditional Senegalese music plays in the background, allowing such sounds to become representative of strength and innovation rather than primeval tradition (Edoro). Every instance in which African life is associated with power, intellect, and innovation builds a new narrative. The film becomes a medium through which to show the world African strength and African beauty, something that Africans have always known to be true, but the world had not had the chance to see.

Despite all that the movie does do to bring new narratives to light, this is not to say that the film does a perfect job of eradicating the Orientalist mindset. There are many instances throughout the movie in which African stereotypes are emphasized and the binary relationship between Westerners and Africans is reinforced. One such instance occurs right before T'Challa is crowned the King of Wakanda and ritual combat for the throne takes place. The battle ground is staged on top of a waterfall, with the Wakandan tribes overlooking from surrounding rocks and ledges. As the camera zooms out to show the entirety of the scene, the viewer is

overwhelmed with an array of color. Each Wakandan is outfitted with bright dress and extravagant face makeup and piercings, and together they chant to the beat of the drum. The ceremony proceeds, and eventually a challenger from an outsider tribe appears. The tribe emerges from a cave in the side of the waterfall, barking like dogs and wearing gorilla masks. Though this scene may at first appear to be showing off African culture, it becomes more and more clear how it based less on culture than cultural stereotypes. The setting of a beautiful waterfall at the edge of a flourishing jungle plays into the stereotype of Africa as being made up of wild and luxurious landscapes, unspoiled by cultivation and privatization of land. Though it is understandable how the costume designers were attempting to bring many African cultures into the film, their overuse of traditional African dress, piercings, and makeup, coupled with the chanting and beating of drums push this scene from being representative to being appropriation. To top it all off, the challenger to the throne is depicted as more animal than human, with the animal masks and barking pointing to the understanding of Africa as inhumane and primitive. The movie does a lot to portray African culture in a positive light, but sometimes this is exaggerated to the point that it becomes counter to the goal it is trying to accomplish.

However, in order to fully analyze the failings and successes of the film, one must understand that the Orientalist mindset is founded upon the use and exchange of many different types of power. Said defines Orientalism as a discourse that is produced from the exchange of many types of power, including "power political," "power cultural," and "power moral" (12), all of which are interdependent and therefore hard to dispel. If *Black Panther* had eradicated all of these types of power in one film, it would have accomplished quite the feat. Although the film is not perfect, it does deal with the different types of power and bring in entirely new ideas of power.

One thing that the film does achieve is portraying Africa as a world power. Throughout the movie, Wakandans deal with the problems created by the villain Klaw, and they defeat the scheme that Killmonger has for world domination. By integrating themselves into global issues and being an important part of an international team, the people of Wakanda portray Africans as significant and powerful on the world stage. For one of the first times in film history, Africa is being illustrated as a global powerhouse, a state with the strength to be influential on an international scale and save the globe from impending doom. Not only is Africa being portrayed as power, but so are women, and women of color in particular. The women warriors in the film, the Dora Milaje, as well as Queen Ramonda and Shuri, are all integral parts of the well-greased machine that is Wakanda. Without them, the state would lose a great deal of power and strength in their military, a great deal of knowledge from their leadership, and a great deal of innovation from their technology. This directly contradicts the Orientalist idea of the strong masculine West vs. the weak feminine East and speaks to power intellectual and power cultural. The culmination of these two powers result in a sort of Afrofuturism—an imagination of what would have happened within Africa had colonialism never occurred. By creating a new African state and fantasizing what the impacts of a African powerhouse would look like, *Black Panther* allows us to come up with a speculative answer to this question that can never truly be answered. Though the film does not portray African culture with perfection or dispel every unjust power dynamic between the West and Africa, it does allow the viewer to see new types of power on the big screen, all while helping them to imagine a world without colonialism.

The concept of Orientalism is integral to the understanding of the deeper significance of the film *Black Panther*. Understanding the founding ideas of the theory aids one in seeing how the film exemplifies the idea of "othering," while understanding how such a thing was

established throughout history allows one to see how colonialism influenced the final product. Analyzing the movie with a grasp of the relationship between knowledge and power, and perceiving therefore that truth is relative, reveals the central goal of the film: to bring about new narratives that challenge the single story of Africa that has been perpetuated for centuries. Though it occasionally plays on African stereotypes, in the end *Black Panther* works to introduce new ideas of power and allows one to play with the concept of Afrofuturism. This portrayal of a powerful and futuristic Africa causes viewers to yearn for what they cannot have— an Africa free of the effects of colonialism. As the film works to provide a possible answer to the question that is presented by Afrofuturism as a concept, it simultaneously begs a new question: can a community that has been deliberately rubbed out have a future? Though the answer to this question will only come with time, the depiction of a strong and innovative nation provides the audience with the hope that this will be the future that Africa will possess—for it is certainly the future that Africa deserves.

Works Cited

Black Panther. Directed by Ryan Coogler. Written by Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole. Marvel

   Studios, 2018.

Edoro, Ainehi. "The New Image of Africa in *Black Panther*." *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 4 Dec. 2018,

   za.boell.org/en/2018/12/04/new-image-africa-black-panther.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.