

Black Panther: An Analysis of the Musical Score and the Identity(s) it Creates

Atoshi Sikdar

Abstract

The representation of Black community in popular media has often been constructed to serve streamlined ideological purposes. With the 2018 movie, *Black Panther* Marvel Cinematic Universe managed to produce a revolutionary piece of cinema that changed the fabric of the superhero genre for decades to come. The movie utilises its score and geographical locations and set designs as instruments to build its narrative. The purpose of this essay is to thereby critically analyse the contribution of music and the spaces it occupies within the movie in constructing (or deconstructing) the notion of a homogenised black identity.

In the year 2018, the Marvel Cinematic Universe set out to unleash into the world an alleged pioneer of black representation in mainstream media. A revolutionary piece of art, *Black Panther* claims to have emerged as one of the first Black superheroes thus subverting prejudiced media representations of the black community. In this project, one of the most notable instruments employed by the creators of the movie was music. Unlike other movies within the MCU, the director has reportedly taken considerable care while building the score, breathing life into spaces and characters through the sounds.

Taken inspiration from the West African nation of Senegal, musical director Ludwig Göransson, attempts to combine the rhythm and percussion from traditional African styles of music with more modern arrangements. According to Göransson, this creative decision was solely made to build upon the running theme of innovation vs tradition in the movie. (3) The leitmotifs thus created have contributed to the creation of pockets of identities within the movie. The question here is whether the identities being created are simply puppets to the commercialised media gimmick, therefore giving in to the long-held perceptions about the blacks.

Historically speaking, the African American people residing in the USA had found a way to reclaim their distinct spaces through music, art, other alternate forms of expression. Music, for them, was a freedom they rarely encountered. (1) In the face of slavery, both physical and ideological, music held fast as one of the torchbearers of the formation of the black culture. In this strain, it is not entirely unbelievable that the makers of *Black Panther* decided to give music such an important role in the creation of meaning through the movie.

Creation of Spatial Identity

As is true for all marvel movies, the scenes take us through a range of places all over the world. Whether it

is the fulcrum point of the movie, Wakanda, which is announced through a beautiful folk song about the death of an elephant sung by Senegalese writer, Baaba Maal (3) or when South Korea is ushered in by a prominently Korean song. Interestingly, London is not assigned any such distinguishing musical score. Almost as if the eastern boundaries have to be accredited a certain defining sound in order to lend it representation, but who does not know London, right?

What we are considering in this essay is how Wakanda situates itself within the globalised narrative that is presented to us and how it appears within its own boundaries when set against the other clans. The representation is complex because it moves beyond the historical timeline of blacks in America, stretching to their “roots” in Africa, as it were. The nature of Marvel’s representational politics begs the question of whether American popular culture can in fact claim Black Panther as a revolutionising piece of cinema or does it simply reaffirm some of the long-held prejudices against the community (albeit, packaged in a way that speaks differently). The line demarcating the two sides is rather blurred in that it almost never provides a clear answer to the dilemma that is posed.

The film, through spaces and musical choices ultimately ends up vying for the appeal of the commercial market, an unfortunate by-product of being primarily capitalist. The traditional sounds are refused entry into the more civilised white-centric spaces. Even when visiting an eastern country, the music is reminiscent of western influences thus creating an uneven confluence of “exotic” cultures, one where hierarchy peaks through a veil of equalised representation. On the other hand, scenes of the ritualistic fights and challenges where Boseman fights the Jabari clan leader, M’baku, is staged on a background of tribal cries. The loud, almost unabashedly primitive shouts of the tribes on several occasions capture a defiant cry for freedom, a space claimed as their own. Wakanda is their territory, one that has and shall forevermore remain their own. The music doesn’t just fade into the background anymore but makes a boisterous entry into the foreground; we are black.

Alternatively, Göransson’s decision to overlay tribal percussion instruments with explicitly modern and borderline western classical arrangements speak volumes, especially when juxtaposed with Wakanda’s industrial space with overarching skyscrapers signifying the mark of man vehemently etched across the heart of nature. The use of western sounds overpowering the tribal, native African sounds are mirrored in the scene itself where the looming structures of the city almost wipe out the natural landscape around.

But also, there is something questionable about focusing on tribal sounds as the only representative sound of African heritage. The tribal beats skilfully drowned out by the more western tones suggest a scrambling to cover up just enough of their coloured history to remain relevant. Are they guilty of typecasting as well? Or have the directors who sought out to extinguish existing norms by bringing in black representation ended up reinforcing the long-held images of black culture without actually a moving past them? The brain tends to move back and forth between the two very real possibilities, unable to pin down the apparent versus the unconscious intent of the filmmakers. Additionally, the tribal sounds only occupy spaces where Wakandan characters are placed, separating them from the rest of the world, as it were, both intentionally and figuratively. Even as they have achieved unparalleled technological development, they need to remain inside the spaces that have been designated for them. It is noteworthy the nature of the

space that Wakanda constitutes of, a wild expanse of forest, rough mountains into which their “civilised space” is carved. When this civilised space is first introduced to the viewer’s senses, it is backed by the tribal sounds seamlessly slipping into the more popularized, distinctly White sound.

The existing and massively perpetuated prejudice against the Blacks can be reduced to certain characteristics that the white community codified the black people as – animalistic, childlike, immature, semi-humanoid creatures. (2) One can assume that setting the musical score around tribal sounds was done with the intention of ascertaining an individual identity for this particular black community, one that is untouched by white hands. However, noticing the range and disparities of sounds used within the Wakandan empire itself, one can say that the tone set for the Jabari clan remains primitive and wholly animalistic with their monkey masks and wild chants.

This is obviously backed by the lack of resources and underdeveloped space that the clan is situated within, as opposed to Wakanda that seems to be the “self” that retains an almost hegemonic control over the technological empire that they have built.

This characterisation is further assisted by the ominous bass sounds used to give colour to the scenes attributed to them and the apprehensive attitudes of every other clan towards them. When they enter the ritual fight with M’baku substituting for the “other” in the situation, the remaining clans react as they would towards an enemy and not one of their own. However, the rebellious streak that marks the Jabari’s opposing ideas towards Wakanda’s treatment of their technological power is ultimately tamed as well when they end up joining hands with the “good side”.

Even within America, the space that is occupied by T’chaka’s brother, is very evocative of racial politics in modern American spaces. There hasn’t been any evolution in the depiction of the black occupied space. The neighbourhood and the kids playing in the basketball court is all foregrounded with a rap song playing for the viewers to gauge their entry into a new territory; one that remains unseen by many. The negro ghetto comes to mind, a space of black community that remains a largely forceful rather than a voluntary coming together. (1)

Creation of Character Identity Apart from the evident creation of spatial identity through music, like the use of traditional African instruments like the kalimba and balaphone to highlight the daily Wakandan life, music has also been employed as a creative power for characters. (3) N’jadaka (a.k.a. Erik Killmonger), who plays the anti-hero in the movie, is given a distinct sound that announces his presence each time the scene cuts to a new one. This trope is quite frequently used in many mainstream movies where the viewer’s perception of a character’s morality and inclinations within the picture is directed by the music that precedes it. Even before we delve into any actions committed by N’jadaka, we are met with a specific character tune tinged with a foreboding and suspiciousness.

N’jadaka’s theme music is contrasted with the music that accompanies T’challa which in addition to being fairly upbeat, also carries a milieu of beats that have been recognised as 808 kicks which provides balance

to his identity. He, being the King of Wakanda, is mirroring the state of his State as a perfect combination of the past and the future. (3) In addition, characters like the Dora Milaje are presented with a “yipping” sound that is descriptive of their warrior spirit. This in turn concretizes their power as the all-female space in the movie. (3)

Conclusion

Even as *Black Panther* is heralded as the emissary for black representation within a highly white space, it does come with its own share of problems. The insistence on using traditional music that echoes tribal culture adds an unnecessary air of fictitiousness to the movie. How is the representation helpful if only based on the same old frame of reference for Black history? The young African American people of America who are struggling to gain traction of their own identity might not even benefit from the portrayal of a life and culture that they have never physically been a part of. Years ago, when the comic Black Panther was brought into existence, Don McGregor sought to create a gritty and realistic story arc that would be representative of the existing politics and accompanying issues for the blacks. (4) However, it was soon replaced Kirby's version which was far more sanitised for the white palette.

Interestingly, the film's inclusion of marginalised communities extends beyond the Blacks. Herein, the film lends itself to a potential analysis of the mis-representation of other marginalised communities portrayed in it as well. The choice of representing an East Asian space with a certain

style of music, or the questioning of masculine/feminine binary are instances that open up various avenues through which oppression and subversion can be interrogated.

It is not hard to see how the film itself is formulated to soothe rather than stir the population. Not unlike the cultural appropriation of black forms of art that happened just a few decades ago, this movie also becomes an instrument of commercialisation of black culture. Moreover, the complexity of the racial representation in the movie, especially considering the director's race, is further emphasised through music when pulling the viewers into the movie and directing their perception of a space. Music and sounds evoke feelings, incite thoughts, help you build on your experiences. For the Black viewer, the movie becomes a confluence of ideological markers. On the one hand, it manages to bring a historically marginalised community to the fore. Simultaneously, it creates a space that systematically reinstates only one kind of Black identity which stems from a hackneyed perception of Black history. Marvel has successfully taken the first leap towards representation, however, the need for more flexibility in its inclusivity still remains unfulfilled.

Works Cited

- John Francis Szwed. *Black Americans*. Washington, D.C., Voice Of America, 1978, pp. 119– 131, 171–185.
- Sen, Sudip. “The Black Panther and the Monkey Chant.” *African Identities*, vol. 16, no. 3, 3 July 2018, pp. 231–233, 10.1080/14725843.2018.1493079.
- “Straight Outta Wakanda: How the “Black Panther” Score Fixed Marvel’s Music Problem.” *Soundfly*, 2 Mar. 2018, (<https://flypaper.soundfly.com/write/straight-outta-wakanda-how-the>

black-panther-score- fixed-marvels-music-problem/)

- Roach, David, and Peter Sanderson. “Black Panther | Creators, Origin, Stories, & Film.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 26 Apr. 2018, (www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Panther-comic-book-character)