Ambiguous Mr. Fox: Black Actors and Interest Convergence in the Superhero Film

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Introduction

How does conglomerate Hollywood construct superhero blockbusters for a domestic market structured by American racial ideologies? As commodities and as marketing tools for larger media brands, these films aspire to wide popularity, and the norms of this genre demand that the superhero pursue a universalist and prosocial mission, fighting on behalf of "the people"—the city, the nation, or the planet—broadly imagined as having convergent interests. These films must therefore appeal ambiguously to audience segments that hold contradictory understandings of how race inflects American life.

This essay looks primarily at the character of Lucius Fox, played by Morgan Freeman in Christopher Nolan's Batman films for Warner Brothers (2005–2012), and it argues that Fox demonstrates Warner Brothers' skill in creating a character that appeals across American racial-ideological lines. Moreover, the essay argues that Fox offered a template that Marvel Studios then followed in its development of black sidekicks for the white superheroes in their interconnected "Marvel Cinematic Universe" of films. The latest entry, *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2016), features three different black superheroes, including the Black Panther. As one of the few black superheroes to have his own comic book title, the Panther's appearance in this film would seem to signify Hollywood's willingness to give black superheroes their "due," yet as I will argue, we can also read the film as a successful exercise in what Derrick Bell has called interest convergence, a careful navigation between the desires of black people and the dominant racial ideology of white people.

Symbolic Racism and Racialized Spectatorship

In their silence about race, Hollywood blockbusters demonstrate the movie industry's adaptation to the white racial ideology that social scientists call symbolic racism, the "colorblind" and universalist ideology dominant in the United States since the legal victories of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s.[1] Symbolic racism denies white America's implication in slavery and segregation, it correlates with resistance to the political demands of black people, and it minimizes or denies the importance of race in present-day questions of justice. Symbolic racism operates as ideology in the Marxian sense, making America's

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racialized inequities of power and wealth seem natural and inevitable.

Yet the buying power of nonwhite audiences in the United States means that conglomerate Hollywood still courts them. Blockbusters must therefore make themselves intelligible to persons of color as respectful to nonwhites, presenting black characters that avoid the demeaning stereotypes of Hollywood's past. Studios' appeal to a global hierarchy of audience segments that places white Americans at the top, the largest segment in their largest market, so blockbuster filmmakers find themselves constrained into a narrow channel of ambiguous address. Capital has no racial ideology, but in order for the capital of the culture industries to grow, those industries must create texts compatible with the ideologies of their audiences; a mass-market text that contradicts those ideologies risks a bad return on shareholder investment. It also risks damaging the equity of the larger brand, either character or corporate. The success of blockbusters therefore depends on their heteroglossia, their ability to signify different things to different segments, who have fundamentally different understandings of history, justice, and policy. Scholars approaching these films must therefore consider potentially contradictory readings of the films as texts.

Symbolic racism's preservation of white hegemony has a corollary: the belief among white people that they have become the main victims of racism. In a study comparing black and white perceptions of how race relations have changed in the past fifty years, Michael Norton and Samuel Sommers find "a general mindset gaining traction among white people in contemporary America: the notion that white people have replaced black people as the primary victims of discrimination" (215). This finding helps explain Hollywood blockbusters' virtual silence regarding racism in contemporary American life. To white people who see themselves as the primary victims of racism (e.g., through affirmative action), any film that claims otherwise will seem a race-conscious and therefore rac*ist* attack on beleaguered whiteness. However, a film that sides explicitly with a narrative of white victimhood risks alienating

other segments. So the blockbuster seeks to flatter white peoples' self-conception as "not perpetrators of racism" while also offering nonstereotyped black characters, thereby signifying the filmmakers' respect for black actors and spectators. These films offer to multiple audience segments the opportunity to feel valued by the film.

Since the 1980s, black film scholars have offered theories of spectatorship that revealed the limitations of earlier theories that ignored race. At their best, these interventions explored the complexity of black responses to cinema. Contra Mulvey, bell hooks argued that feminist film criticism had failed to theorize nonwhite women, and that black women remained "'on guard' at the movies" (298), "not duped by mainstream cinema" (295). Manthia Diawara proposed the "resisting spectator" "as a heuristic device to imply that just as some black people identify with Hollywood images of black people, some white spectators, too, resist the racial representations of the dominant cinema" (892). Hollywood films that appealed to white people engaged in a "textual deracination and isolation" of their black characters from any specifically black social or political context, thereby denying black spectators "the possibility of identification with black characters as credible or plausible personalities" (896). Yet such criticisms of Hollywood representations of blackness did not explain the pleasures that black spectators nevertheless found in Hollywood. Jacqueline Bobo examined ways that black female spectators enjoyed and valued *The Color Purple* (Steven Spielberg, 1985) despite the film's retrograde depictions of blackness (272). As Robin R. Means Coleman has argued, most media presentations of racial difference "do not lend themselves necessarily to dichotomies between negative stereotypes and positive images," so "good-bad representational queries" do not exhaust the meanings that media texts contain (83). I therefore seek to avoid what Rebecca Wanzo calls "'just' syntax." "Too often," she writes, "cultural analyses from varied political positions rely on a 'just' syntax: 'Isn't she just a mammy,' 'just a prostitute,' 'just cooning,' 'just a welfare queen,' or 'just a sellout?'" (136-37). Even in the superhero genre,

not known for profound characterization, the reductive "'just' syntax" can obscure contradictions that illuminate the cultural work that blockbusters perform. Hence, I seek to identify ways that successful blockbusters repurpose older stereotypes into themes against which their scripts present variations.

"Spare me the Uncle Tom routine."

Lucius Fox, the salient black character in the Batman films of the 2000s, appears crafted to this end. Morgan Freeman's portrayal of Fox, especially in *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005), warrants attention for three reasons. First, Fox largely conforms to the cinematic stereotype of the black person who helps a young white protagonist fulfill his potential. Spike Lee famously called this figure the Magical Negro, noting its appearance in a spate of films including *What Dreams May Come* (Vincent Ward, 1998), *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999), and *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (Robert Redford, 2000). Lee argues that the figure represents a throwback to classical Hollywood's depictions of black people as happily subservient to white people (Gonzalez, Okorafor-Mbachu).[2] Second, Freeman's character warrants attention because despite its seemingly stereotyped nature, it generated positive responses from the black press. Third, after the success of *Batman Begins*, Marvel Studios began casting major black stars as sidekicks, confidants, and enablers to white heroes while isolating them from any black social or political context. Heroes get lovers, dreams, and social histories; sidekicks do not.

The stereotype of the Magical Negro serves well the ideological needs of symbolic racism, in that it allows the narrative to appear progressive to white audiences for depicting an interracial "friendship" while it also allows the white character to attain or solidify a hegemonic position. Matthew Hughey defines the Magical Negro as "a lower class, uneducated black person who possesses supernatural or magical powers. These powers are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken white people (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people" (544). Hughey identifies ten tropes of Magical Negro films, but only one, "primordial magic," has a supernatural element, and then only metaphorically. Others, like "economic extremity," "hegemonic whiteness," and "material detachment" derive from mundane social relations (555). Hughey does not mention *Batman Begins*, but his observations apply with equal force to Lucius Fox.

Over a long career, Morgan Freeman has portrayed the President of the United States, Nelson Mandela, and Almighty God. The BBC summarizes Freeman's star image as one of "gravitas" ("Film"). Yet for all the dignity of Freeman's star image, he built his early Hollywood résumé on roles flattering to white stereotypes about black people. His first Oscar nomination came for the pimp Fast Black in *Street Smart* (Jerry Schatzberg, 1987), whom the white journalist protagonist (Christopher Reeve) profiles for a story. The journalist sensationally fabricates most of Fast Black's story, and the piece wins acclaim. A black colleague, not knowing about the fabrication, challenges the protagonist: "Why did you choose a subject that embodies the worst of Black people? [...] It might not be conscious racism, but it is racism." Freeman's second Oscar nomination came for the illiterate chauffeur Hoke in *Driving Miss Daisy* (Bruce Beresford, 1989). Hoke helps Miss Daisy maintain her social life, while Daisy, a retired schoolteacher, teaches him to read; the film's condescension toward its black characters has led multiple writers to use *Driving Miss Daisy* as a metonym for benevolent white racism.[3] Freeman's third nomination came for *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, 1994), where Freeman's character, the rightly imprisoned Red, helps the film's wrongly imprisoned white protagonist to escape. Freeman's fourth nomination, and his first win, came for *Million Dollar Baby* (Clint Eastwood, 2004), where he plays a boxing-gym janitor who convinces the gym's white owner to train a white boxing hopeful. As in *Shawshank*,

Freeman provides both voice-over and voice-off narration, although his role remains peripheral and enabling.

Freeman's role as God in *Bruce Almighty* (Tom Shadyac, 2003) offered him a chance to play the paradigmatic Magical Negro: a janitor God. Hughey discusses this performance as exemplary of the trope of economic extremity, since Freeman's God initially appears "mopping floors in an unoccupied building" (556). In this empty industrial space, concrete pillars support the ceiling. The mysterious janitor tells white protagonist Bruce (Jim Carrey) that he knew Bruce's father: "He didn't mind rolling up his sleeves, either, son. People underestimate the benefit of good old manual labor. There's freedom in it. Some of the happiest people in the world go home smelling to high heaven at the end of the day." On could not ask for a clearer example of Spike Lee's "happy slave" stereotype than this. Moreover, *Batman Begins* essentially duplicates this scene when Bruce Wayne first visits Lucius Fox. In both scenes, an elder, low-status black character, played by Freeman, surprises a younger, high-status white character named Bruce by telling him that he knew Bruce's father. In both scenes, the meeting marks the key step in the white protagonist's movement toward fulfilling his potential. Even the postindustrial mise en scène of concrete pillars matches in the two films. Whether or not co screenwriters Christopher Nolan and David Goyer set out to copy the scene for *Batman Begins*, the visual and narrative parallels make clear Freeman's analogous functions in both films.

Goyer also worked on all three of the *Blade* films in the 1990s and 2000s, the first theatrical franchise based on a Marvel property. In 1992, producer Peter Frankfurt had approached Marvel seeking to license a black character to New Line Cinema for an action film (Clark). New Line's action film *Juice* (Ernest R. Dickerson, 1992) had proved a hit, so Frankfurt hoped to replicate its success with another film aimed at "urban" (read: black) audiences. From Marvel, he bought the film rights to a third-tier character, the black vampire-hunter Blade. Goyer scripted New Line's *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998), which grossed $131M worldwide on a $45M budget. Many writers cite its success as the impetus for 20th Century Fox to bet on *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000), which helped turn around Marvel's fortunes.

Like its half-vampire hero, *Blade* occupies a liminal position both in terms of its crossover success, in mainstream and black markets, and in terms of its mixture of cult genre tropes. The early 1990s saw a wave of black-directed and black-themed films that S. Craig Watkins has called "ghetto action" (236), films that range from the social-realist *Boyz N the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), to the exploitative *Menace II Society* (Hughes Brothers, 1993), to the parodic *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (Paris Barclay, 1996). Like many of the 1990s ghetto action films, *Blade* borrows tropes from the black-themed action films of the 1970s, although its success lies in remixing them with tropes from Hammer vampire movies and Hong Kong *wuxia* (a year before *The Matrix*). The streets of *Blade* swirl with trash beneath graffiti-tagged walls and fire escapes, and like John Shaft, Blade's name doubles as a noun denoting part of a weapon: it signifies a power both combative and phallic, aligning Blade with white-directed Blaxploitation heroes *Hammer* (Bruce Clark, 1972), *Slaughter* (Jack Starrett, 1972), and *Black Gunn* (Robert Hartford-Davis, 1972). Like Prince Mamuwalde in *Blacula* (William Crain, 1972), Blade uses his superhuman strength to fight the police, and he eventually takes on an entire SWAT team; one unlucky white cop receives two beatings from Blade over the course of the film. And like the cocaine-dealing antihero of *Super Fly* (Gordon Parks Jr., 1972), Blade uses an underground economy to fund his resistance.

The film uses vampires to present an allegory of black–white relations. The only racial boundaries that explicitly matter to this film divide humans from vampires or divide the "pure blood" vampires (those born of vampire parents) from those "turned" by a bite. The film's villain, Frost, seeks to eliminate the pure-bloods' monopoly on power; although not of pure blood himself, he still finds Blade's defense of humans contemptible,

even traitorous: "Spare me the Uncle Tom routine, OK? You think the humans will ever accept a half-breed like you?" Here, in Frost's reference to the archetype of black collaboration with white supremacy, the script comes closest to acknowledging US history. Vampires mark their human familiars with glyphs that function like a "cattle brand," says Blade, indicating vampire "property," yet the script makes no direct reference to chattel slavery. Later, in an Oedipal revelation typical of the Hollywood superhero, Frost reveals that he bit Blade's pregnant mother, passing vampirism to her unborn son. Against the backdrop of vampires owning human property, the revelation of Blade's parentage recalls white slaveholders' sexual exploitation of female slaves and the "one drop" rules of hypodescent that placed the children of mixed-race union into the subordinate category regardless of phenotype; in the film's racial order, Blade counts as a vampire not because of how he looks but because of one vampire's assault on his mother. Blade's partial vampire (read: white) ancestry remained unknown to him, recalling the substantial yet often unacknowledged (or unknown) European ancestry among African Americans.[4] To viewers alert the film's historical and racial allegory, the script seems critical, even revisionist for a medium-budget action movie, while viewers unable to read this subtext can still enjoy its surface level of vampire-killing melodrama. I read *Blade*, therefore, as a proving ground for the kind of ambiguities of racial address used in *Batman Begins*.

"When I'm asked, I don't have to lie."

Lucius Fox's role as the Batman's helper depends on his economic extremity. A former executive, Fox's unwillingness to cooperate with the profiteering board of Wayne Industries led to his demotion to Applied Sciences. He now occupies a position both figuratively and literally in the depths of the company, in a storage basement. His abjection in this "dead end" (as the CEO put

it to him) enables him to help Bruce Wayne, because Fox can do as he pleases with the mothballed prototypes. Fox's material aid to Wayne's vigilantism thus functions as an affirmation of Bruce's power in two senses. In the first, Fox avers that the prototypes belong to this heir: "Mister Wayne, the way I see it, all this stuff is yours anyway." In the second, Fox advances Wayne's goals without ever mentioning goals (or family or anything) of his own. As far as we know from the script of this film, or the sequels *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012), Fox lives only to serve.

Moreover, to my ear, Lucius Fox's Roman-sounding given name evokes the practice of white slaveholders giving their slaves classical names. Orlando Patterson explains this custom as slaveholders' ironic commentary on their slaves' low status and lack of education (Patterson 56–57). My association may seem farfetched, but less than three minutes after Fox's introduction in the film, Bruce Wayne's butler Alfred refers explicitly to American slavery. As they explore the caverns beneath Wayne Manor, Alfred tells Master Wayne, "In the Civil War, your great-great-grandfather was involved in the Underground Railroad, secretly transporting freed slaves to the north, and I suspect these caverns came in handy." In light of Alfred's speech, the helpful and avuncular Fox, the film's only prominent black character, reads as a signifier of a blackness comfortable under white patronage. Alfred's speech turns America's bloodiest war into an object of nostalgia and racially inflected self-esteem for the protagonist and spectators who identify with him. The Nolan films never tell us how the Waynes made their fortune, although clearly they made it before the 1860s, for Wayne Manor dates back at least that far. Yet Alfred's speech does not implicate the Waynes in America's history of the racialized expropriation of wealth but instead redeems the Waynes as vigilante philanthropists.

Fox fulfills another function of the Magical Negro, in that he provides what Hughey calls "material detachment" (567). Fox never asks Bruce Wayne for anything in exchange for

logistical help. Moreover, Fox dismisses the military-industrial "bean-counters" who "didn't think a soldier's life was worth three hundred grand," showing his rejection of the instrumental rationality of the military contractor. So does his revelation that he worked on the philanthropic elevated train project of Bruce's father, Thomas Wayne. The script thereby hints that Fox's value rationality put him at odds with the other executives of Wayne Industries, resulting in his demotion. Heather Hicks discusses a nonfranchise superhero movie, *Unbreakable* (Shyamalan, 2000), which "invites the fantasy that Black men exist in a childlike relation to economic matters and would gladly cede their own rare material gains in order to be in a more certain—and nostalgic—set of social relations, one in which white men are always already heroes who have merely misplaced their capes" (36). Fox invites a similar fantasy in *Begins*. When Bruce Wayne returns to Gotham after wandering the Earth, Fox helps Wayne reclaim his patrimony: the basement full of gadgets. The film's dénouement restores Wayne Industries to the family's control, when Bruce buys a controlling interest; he then appoints Fox as the new CEO, raising him from basement to boardroom. The film thereby restores the economic relations of its diegetic past, such that one man dominates the corporation, and Lucius Fox once more answers to a boss he calls Mister Wayne. The seemingly progressive appointment of a black CEO obscures the film's restoration of white hegemony.

Yet against my reading of Fox as a Magical Negro, I found no similar criticisms in black press on the film. Instead, press citations of the role mention it in the context of Freeman's busy schedule (Williams, "High"; "Morgan Freeman") or the high box office returns of his films (Richardson; Hughes, Brown, and Robinson). Where I read Freeman's character as "explicitly positive, but latently racist," as Hughey puts it (544), the 2005 Black Movie Awards committee nominated Freeman for Outstanding Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role (Butler). Freeman himself described Lucius Fox as "Batman's version of Q," the gadget-master of the James Bond franchise (qtd. in Williams, "Morgan Freeman"). Why had black commentators not read Fox as I had?

My reading of Freeman's role had failed to account for the possibility that black spectators could approach the film not braced to resist its hegemonic meanings, but open, in Stuart Hall's terms, to negotiate them (516). That is, to look for contradictions, seeking oppositional potential in seemingly hegemonic texts and hegemonic potential in the seemingly oppositional. I had also failed to consider audience response historically, as Janet Staiger does (1-13), which would have required that I understand responses to Lucius Fox in terms of both past superhero blockbusters and also Morgan Freeman's evolving star image. One could generate approving readings of Lucius Fox by applying any one of three redemptive hermeneutics to the character: Lucius Fox's role as technical expert, or Morgan Freeman's dignified star image, or Fox as a victim of structural racism.

First, Lucius Fox departs from Hollywood's tendency to cast white people as technical experts. Karie Hollerbach notes this pattern in television, where white people disproportionately play experts (612), but it obtains in film as well. The 1970s–1980s Superman franchise cast Richard Pryor as a computer genius in *Superman III* (Richard Lester, 1983), but the character also provided comic relief in the tradition of Mantan Moreland: the film's poster shows a dignified Christopher Reeve carrying a panicked, eye-rolling Pryor high over the Grand Canyon. Although *Blade* cast N'Bushe Wright as a hematologist, it cast Kris Kristofferson as Whistler, who designs Blade's vampire-killing gadgets. In other franchises, a white man nearly always plays the technical wizard, from Bernard Quatermass to James Bond's Q, and from Egon Spengler of the *Ghostbusters* (Ivan Reitman, 1984) to Angus MacGyver. Therefore, much as LeVar Burton broke ground on the small screen by playing Geordi La Forge on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Freeman broke ground on the big screen by playing Fox.

Second, Freeman's star image primes spectators to find dignity in his roles. He has played

increasingly prestigious characters, moving from illiterates to school principals to statesmen, and he has done much voice-over narration for non-fiction TV (e.g., the intro to *CBS Evening News*). In the year of *Batman Begins*, Freeman provided narration for both National Geographic's *March of the Penguins* (Luc Jacquet, 2005) and *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005); Esther Zuckerman identifies 2005 as the year "that Morgan Freeman Narrates Movies officially became A Thing." Since then, it has also become a thing lampooned. The *True Facts* video series on YouTube parodies nature documentaries, but its creators also made a "True Facts About Morgan Freeman." It begins, "Morgan Freeman was born in 1937. He narrated his own birth" (zefrank1). This joke reveals a "true fact" about star image: it has the power to revise understandings of the past and to inflect understandings of the present. While *Driving Miss Daisy* became, at least among black people, a metonym for white self-congratulation and condescension, Morgan Freeman, the actor, became a metonym for gentle authoritativeness. Parody can double as high flattery; in the case of *True Facts*, it confirms *Black Enterprise*'s description of Freeman as "one of the most respected people in Hollywood" (Richardson).

Third, resisting spectators may read Lucius Fox as a victim of institutional racism. The film hints at the reasons for Fox's demotion from the board, but the scenes in the boardroom offer a clue: the board looks entirely white. We see only one person of color in the boardroom scenes, the white CEO's black receptionist. Nobody remarks on race, but nobody has to. Fox's demotion appears compatible with what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls "racism without racists" (2-4), ostensibly color-blind practices that function to exclude people of color from positions of power, maintaining white domination "in covert, institutional, and apparently nonracial ways" (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 52). In this context, Fox appears to be the victim of an all-white power structure, and his aid to Bruce Wayne becomes a covert defiance of that

structure. Even Fox's deference to Wayne becomes legible as irony, notably when he jokes about Wayne's increasingly odd requests, such experimental lightweight fabric for "BASE jumping."

Wayne   What kind of shapes can you make?

Fox   It can be tailored to fit any structure based on a rigid skeleton.

Wayne   Too expensive for the army?

Fox   Well, I don't think they ever tried to market it to the billionaire, spelunking, BASE-jumping crowd.

Wayne   Look, Mr. Fox—

Fox   Yes sir?

Wayne   If you're uncomfortable—

Fox   Mr. Wayne, if you don't want tell me exactly what you're doing, when I'm asked, I don't have to lie. But don't think of me as an idiot.

Fox tells Wayne and the audience not to mistake his help for servility or stupidity. Although he infers Wayne's dual identity as the Batman, he maintains plausible deniability. In the sequel, Fox meets Wayne in a busy district of Hong Kong and shows Wayne a new mobile phone.

Fox   I had R&D work it up. Sends out a high frequency pulse, records the response time for mapping an environment.

BW   Sonar! [Wayne smiles.] Just like a—

Fox   Submarine, Mister Wayne. Like a submarine.

Fox, maker of surveillance technology and a cautious operator, stops his boss from saying something that could be used against them.

In light of Fox's role as the supplier of the Batman's gadgets, audiences can read Bruce Wayne's appointment of Fox as CEO at the end of the film as one of Wayne's tactics for ensuring that the Batman can continue his vigilantism. However, in light of Fox's subtle resistance, the appointment

can also represent a vindication of Fox's merit, not only as a technician but also as a politically canny survivor in a racist corporation. A resisting spectator could read Wayne's appointment of Fox as redress for the demotion and abuse that Fox suffered under the previous regime, abuse like the CEO's gratuitous firing Fox in the film's latter half. If we read Fox's appointment as redress, then it plays as an inversion of Bonilla-Silva's notion of racism without racists, functioning as "affirmative action without race-consciousness." That is, nobody mentions Fox's blackness or the board's whiteness, yet Fox nevertheless makes his way into a position from which he was formerly excluded, and which the film has urged all spectators to believe that he deserves. His appointment remains simultaneously overdetermined and ambiguous, happening for any of the above reasons. I initially read Bruce Wayne's rehiring of Fox as a paternalistic gesture that solidified Wayne's authority to hire and fire at will, but a race-conscious spectator can read it as redress for institutional racism.

Donald Bogle argues that although many black roles in Hollywood instantiate stereotypes, "The essence of Black film history is not found in the stereotyped role but in what certain talented actors have done with the stereotype" (xxii). Freeman's nuanced performance, showing ingenuity, flint, kindness, and the willingness to subvert (white) authority, helped him transcend the stereotype of the Magical Negro, to present a character that black and white audiences could enjoy. For black spectators who choose to identify with Lucius Fox, the film interpellates them as intelligent, worthy of dignity, and resisting the authority of white people who profess colorblindness even as they keep black people in marginal or abject positions. At the same time, white spectators who identify with Bruce Wayne can miss this dynamic entirely, seeing Fox instead as an avuncular helper and proof that Wayne and Wayne's ancestors, even as far back as the 1860s, bear no "guilt" for racism. Much as Fox prefers not to have to lie to his superiors about why Bruce Wayne needs gadgets, *Batman Begins* prefers not to give a direct answer about the reasons for Fox's appointment as CEO. Spectators provide their own.

Interest Convergence and *Civil War*

Since 2008 Marvel has developed the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), a franchise of interconnected, self-produced film and television properties modeled on the continuities of Marvel's comics' titles. Following the example of *Batman Begins*, Marvel Studios has cast in its films high-profile black actors—Samuel L. Jackson, Terrence Howard, Don Cheadle, Idris Elba, and Anthony Mackie—actors who built their reputations in race-conscious films, television, and theater. Their likenesses appear prominently in Marvel's advertising, yet here they play secondary, flat roles: sidekicks, allies, or enablers to white protagonists within seemingly "colorblind" narratives. Still, they avoid the kinds of stereotyped portrayals that provoked black protest in the past. The black press has generally celebrated these roles, praising the actors' versatility, their global box office power, and their function as role models for black children. Marvel Studios' films have succeeded beyond industry expectations both in the United States and overseas, validating the studio's strategy. The *Hollywood Reporter* has called the MCU "the only live-action brand that matters to mass audiences" (Masters).

Texts on marketing to multicultural audiences stress the need for media texts to show "respect" for blacks people "because, after all these years, many African Americans still do not believe they are respected by society at large" (Miller and Kemp 19). In *Multicultural Intelligence: Eight Make-or-Break Rules for Marketing to Race, Ethnicity, and Sexual Orientation*, David Morse asks, "how do Blacks want to be perceived? First, and most important, *they do not want to be stereotyped*" [his emphasis] (66). Morse's advice on advertising applies with equal force to the movies:

"In the old days, multicultural marketing was easy [….] since African Americans rarely if ever appeared in ads as anything but distorted stereotypes, the trick was to include them, and don't make them look too silly" (212). Another author warns white media creators against attempting to write black vernacular because it may read as stereotyped or parodic (Mueller 66). Others warn that signifiers of racial difference can drift into stereotype even when the marketer has the best intentions (Nwankwo, Aiyeku, and Ogbuehi 233). Deracination seems the safe approach: cast the respectable black actor in the feature-length commercial for your transmedia franchise but make no explicit reference to race.

Captain America: Civil War brings together on screen three black superheroes. Previously, Marvel's *Iron Man* franchise had introduced Tony Stark's sidekick Colonel James Rhodes, who wears the War Machine armor that Stark designed, and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2014) had introduced Sam Wilson, Captain America's flying sidekick, Falcon. *Civil War* brings these two into a narrative with the MCU's first nonsidekick black superhero, the Black Panther. Many commentators claimed that the black Panther appeared due to fan demand, but we have reason to show skepticism toward such a simple explanation.

On 18 August 2014, less than two weeks after Ferguson police shot to death Michael Brown, Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige said that fans had been demanding a *Black Panther* movie and that Marvel considered this "groundswell" "something that we have to pay attention to" ("Marvel Head"). A group calling itself Shado Vision Entertainment had launched a Kickstarter on 17 August, the day before Feige's statement, to fund the video series *Reign of Wakanda: Return of the Black Panther*, but the campaign secured only $106 of its $20,000 goal. The other two Kickstarter projects related to the character, "DeadPool/Black Panther: The Gauntlet" and "DeadPool/Black Panther Back in Red & Black" [sic] both failed, raising less than $100 apiece. In October 2014, fans created the "Black Panther Movie Now" Facebook group, with the tagline,

"Let Marvel know we want diversity in superhero movies and share this page!" yet at the time of writing, only 2,779 users follow the page. This and the dismal Kickstarter flops suggest something less than Feige's "groundswell," but at a time when Black Lives Matter protestors had taken to the streets to protest police killings of unarmed black men, a different kind of "groundswell" preoccupied many Americans. It may also have preoccupied executives at Marvel and their corporate parent, the Walt Disney Company.

Then, in early 2015, a different protest movement erupted. When only white actors received nominations in major acting categories for the 2014 Academy Awards, Twitter activists used the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite to highlight Hollywood's history of systemic racism. That summer, Marvel announced recruiting Ta-Nehisi Coates to write for a new *Black Panther* series (McFarland). In 2014, Coates wrote the keenly race-conscious "Case for Reparations" in *The Atlantic*, and in July of 2015 his memoir, *Between the World and Me*, appeared wide acclaim. Yet he had never worked in the comics industry, which suggests that his recruitment had more to do with his value as public relations than with his ability to script Black Panther comics. Against critics who see the inclusion of Black Panther in *Civil War* as a sign of Marvel's response to (black) fandom's demands, I would argue instead that we should read this inclusion as an overdetermined case of brand management in response to events in the wider world. On 5 May 2016, the day before the release of *Civil War*, *Time* observed regarding the Black Panther, "[t]o an entertainment giant like Disney, diversifying means appealing to a wider audience" (Dockterman). Adding the Panther to the MCU and to the trailer for *Civil War* (which screened before Disney's *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*) signified to black audiences the kind of diversity that they demand, but it also gave Marvel the market segmentation that shareholders demand—and that brand managers get paid to engineer.

T'Challa, the Black Panther's alter ego, enjoys the highest prestige of any character in *Civil War*, first as prince, then as king of the fictional African nation of Wakanda. Unlike James Rhodes or Sam

Wilson, T'Challa gets a family and a motivation, when an assassin murders his father, King T'Chaka. Despite Wakanda's monarchy, the film presents the country as rich and technologically hypermodern. Yet the Black Panther gets little screen time relative to Captain America or Iron Man; he remains a supporting character, aggravating the conflict between the two white leads by seeking revenge against the assassin. Moreover, the film says nothing about the historical context of Wakanda's technological prosperity in relation to European colonialism or the transatlantic slave trade, which had dire effects on black Africa. *Civil War*'s Wakanda lets every spectator feel blameless.

The film's central white characters—Captain America, Iron Man, Black Widow, Hawkeye, Scarlet Witch, and even the android Vision—all have romantic interests, but the black characters have none. Like Marvel's earlier black superheroes on screen, Blade and Storm, Black Panther lacks an erotic life. I interpret this as a symptom of the white filmmakers' and executives unspoken fear that a romance between the two black characters the two would tip the film from "crossover" into "urban": that is, that by showing a romantic relationship between two black characters, white audiences would identify the film as Not For Them. Will Smith encountered this fear when the producers of the film *Hitch* (Andy Tennant, 2005) waffled on casting the film's female lead. Smith complained of the "myth" "that if you have two Black actors, a male and a female, in the lead of a romantic comedy […] people around the world don't want to see it" (qtd. in Weaver 369). The alternative of casting a white actress opposite a black lead poses, as Weaver puts it, "significant risk because of the lingering taboo among some audience members against interracial relationships" (369). A 2012 study by the University of Chicago's General Social Survey on white racial attitudes found that 21% of respondents volunteer that "they would oppose having a close relative marry a Black person" (Cox). If we extrapolate this percentage to the larger white population, we get some 46,946,000 white people opposed to interracial romance—nine million more than the total black population of the United States.

Desexing black superheroes offers studios one means to avoid the choice between pleasing black spectators and pleasing racist white people.

To most white spectators, presence of black characters as friends and helpers of white protagonists shows that equality of opportunity obtains in the films' "postracial" diegetic world. To potentially oppositional black spectators, the presence of acclaimed black actors playing heroic, serious (nearly always male) roles signifies that the films respect black talent and black audiences. However, black representation in blockbuster films usually results in "the paradox of market segmentation": shallow and deracinated black characters (Hollerbach 612). That is, "colorblind" blockbusters offer salient black actors but nothing about black life, only white fantasies of multiculturalism. When Marvel Studios replaced Terrence Howard with Don Cheadle as James Rhodes between *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) and *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), Marvel CEO and largest shareholder Ike Perlmutter told a fellow executive, "no one would notice because Black people 'look the same'" (Garrahan). Perlmutter spoke the crypto-racist truth of the blockbuster: for market segmentation, black actors of a certain respectability do, functionally, "look the same." That is, the movie needs a serious black actor—any serious black actor—in its ensemble so that white people see the hero as "not racist" and so that black people see the movie as respectful. The role's shallowness means that changing actors makes little difference.

Derrick Bell's theory of interest convergence offers a complementary explanation for the salience of black talent in Marvel's films. Bell sought to explain why the federal government worked to end segregation in the 1950s and 1960s, and he found that the interests of the black minority temporarily "converged" with those of the white majority during the Cold War. Washington intervened to end *de jure* segregation as part of a larger geopolitical strategy not only because desegregation made the United States look progressive to potential Cold War allies and clients but also because it undercut domestic black radicalism (524).[5] The Soviet threat motivated Washington

to overcome white peoples' resistance to giving up their privileges. "The interest of Blacks in achieving racial equality," writes Bell, "will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites" (523). Applying this to superhero movies, we can read studios' post-2005 policy of casting serious black actors in white-led superhero blockbusters as a case of interest convergence in market segmentation. White people want to feel that they merit the comforts they enjoy; black people want to see black characters depicted with respect; conglomerates want maximum profit on their intellectual property. The contraction of the DVD market between 2008 and 2010 means that studios' profit margins have shrunk, increasing pressure on each blockbuster to make itself ideologically welcoming to the greatest number of segments. Black people and white peoples' differing interests converged with Hollywood's, resulting in films adapted to all three pressures.

The trade press has noted the global success of Hollywood blockbusters starring black actors. Hollywood's conventional wisdom holds that race-conscious black films do poorly overseas, but "colorblind" films, where "Will Smith, Denzel Washington, or Halle Berry play characters who just happen to be Black" can succeed (McNary). As franchises continue to dominate blockbuster production, some argue that individual stars matter less: "high-concept films or those based on popular books or comic books have replaced the star system as the engine behind foreign sales" (Ross). The success of Warner Brothers' *Batman* cycle and Marvel's *Iron Man*, each of which have recast supporting actors between sequels, suggests that brand identity and the tropes of a given franchise matter more than the particularity of actors outside lead roles. *Variety* reported huge overseas openings for Marvel's *Iron Man 2* and *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011) (Stewart "*Iron Man 2*," "H'wood"). *Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) surpassed these (Stewart, "Few"); *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013) then surpassed *Avengers* ("*Iron* Giant"). Domestic box office matters less and less. In April 2014, *Variety*'s reporting on CinemaCon, a major industry convention, stressed the international thrust of franchise filmmaking: "With 70% of box office revenues coming from international returns, much of that on tentpole releases," studios therefore focused "on special-effects extravaganzas and sequels, product that plays strongly overseas" (Cheney and Stewart). The People's Republic of China, in particular, presents a huge, growing market. Between 2010 and 2012, total PRC box office returns increased 29%, surpassing $2 billion USD (Stewart, "H'wood"). In 2013, Mainland Chinese returns increased by 27%, "the first time a foreign market has eclipsed $3 billion" (Cheney and Stewart). Furthermore, Mainland China's "unprecedented building of cinema screens at some 5,000 per year" has led to forecasts in the industry that this market will "soon equal that of North America's" (Frater). During 2015, Mainland box office figures grew by 48% ("China Box"). As the PRC's urban development continues, we can expect Chinese demand for politically ambiguous, "colorblind" American blockbusters to grow.

The growth of the Chinese market might also explain why *Captain America: Civil War* contains dialogue in which a major character disparages democratic deliberation yet faces no challenge, not even from Captain America himself. Prince T'Challa complains in English to one of the Avengers about the tedious "politics" of an international summit in Vienna: "Two people in a room can get more done than a hundred." At this, King T'Chaka steps into the frame and jokingly interrupts, "Unless you need to move a piano." The father–son joking allows *Civil War* to have it both ways about democracy, and it helps the audience forget Captain America's history of punching democracy's enemies in the jaw. T'Challa gives T'Chaka a slight bow and hails him with a word that sounds like "*baba*." This suggests a son addressing his father respectfully in their native language (Wakandan), but to anyone who speaks Mandarin, this display of filial piety sounds much like *bàba* (爸爸), father.

Stories of Hollywood's cultivation of blockbusters to please censors in Mainland China have circulated widely in the trade press in recent years.

These include Marvel films like *Iron Man 3*, which recast the Mandarin of the comics as a white American, and *Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016) which recast the Ancient One, a Tibetan man in the comics, as a white British woman. *Doctor Strange* screenwriter C. Robert Cargill said, "if you acknowledge that Tibet is a place and that he's Tibetan, you risk alienating one billion people who think that that's bullshit and risk the Chinese government going, 'Hey, you know one of the biggest film-watching countries in the world? We're not going to show your movie because you decided to get political'" (qtd. in McMillan). Yet Marvel denied changing the character to please Beijing and vaguely adduced their "record of diversity" as well as comic-book continuity: "The Ancient One is a title that is not exclusively held by any one character, but rather a moniker passed down through time, and in this particular film the embodiment is Celtic" (qtd. in Rahman). Marvel seeks to have it both ways with their whitewashing of the Ancient One, offering it not as proof of Hollywood's racism or Disney's proleptic self-censorship in the service of an authoritarian, one-party state's political demands, but as proof of "diversity." *Doctor Strange* represents Marvel's attempt to steer the interests of Disney shareholders between those of longtime fans, Beijing censors, and Asian Americans eager for an end of Hollywood whitewashing and yellowface.

Conclusion

Mass-market films remind scholars to pay attention to the complexity of spectator response, but they also remind us of the need to historicize that response. We can better understand what black and white audiences want from movies if we also understand what they do not want or what they will no longer accept. Superhero blockbusters present a vision of America with simplified conflicts; the appearance of multicultural integration in these films results from studios' pursuit of a wide audience that includes progressives and reactionaries. In the tea leaves of the blockbuster, audience segments can see the social truths they want to see. Conglomerated studios hope that these segments will then want more of the brand, whether on screen or via other platforms, and whether supplied by other arms of the same conglomerate or by licensees.

Marvel Studios has announced the casting of Lupita Nyong'o as "the Black Panther's love interest" in the stand-alone *Black Panther* film planned for release in February 2018 (Kit, "Nyong'o"). Ryan Coogler will direct, and Michael B. Jordan will play a supporting role (Kit, "Jordan"). Nyong'o, who won an Oscar for *Twelve Years a Slave*, brings to the project the mainstream cachet of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, while Jordan and Coogler bring the indie cachet of their work on the acclaimed *Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler, 2013), which told the story of the killing of unarmed black man Oscar Grant by a white police officer.[6] Clearly Marvel plans to aim *Black Panther* at a black audience; still, crossover hits like *Drumline* (Charles Stone III, 2002) do happen. And if not for the unexpected crossover success *Blade*, we might have no Black Panther movie to await—with hope or trepidation.

Notes

1. Writers use various terms to refer to this racial ideology, but "colorblind," with or without scare quotes, appears widely in writing by psychologists and sociologists, as does "modern racism."

2. I prefer Lee's term to Hicks's "Magical African American Friend" (27) because of the connotations of the dated and potentially offensive word *Negro*. Lee's term suggests that this stock character clings to life after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements retired *Negro* from everyday use.

3. Ed Guerrero calls *Driving Miss Daisy* "a putrid fantasy on race relations" (245). For other examples, see Public Enemy's "Burn, Hollywood, Burn," Martin Lawrence's *You So Crazy* (Thomas Schlamme, 1994), and *Be Kind Rewind* (Michel Gondry, 2008).

4. The practice of mixed-race persons "passing" as white people also means that the reverse is true: many white people have unacknowledged black ancestry. See Henry Louis Gates Jr., "How Many 'White' People are Passing?"

5. NAACP lawyers, Supreme Court justices, and desegregationist legislators routinely cited the propaganda value of desegregation

as a compelling point in its favor. See Mary Dudziak's *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*.

6. *Fruitvale Station* received nominations for the Black Reel Awards, and it won an African-American Film Critics Association award for Best Independent Film as well as an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Independent Motion Picture

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