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Diversifying Representation in Film: An Examination of Racial and Ethnic Inclusivity in *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asians*

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the  
Department of Communication and Media  
West Chester University  
West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of  
Master of Arts

By

Alexandria Hatchett

May 2020

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## Abstract

Although Hollywood films are distributed globally, they have historically featured white actors and reflected Western life. As Hollywood influences one's understanding of race in the United States, *Black Panther* (2018) and *Crazy Rich Asian's* (2018) inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities combat racism and xenophobia and reveal alternate ways in which power is manifested in society. This thesis project utilizes critical rhetoric as its method to give a voice to communities of color that have been marginalized due to colonization and persistent structural racism. It employs Critical Race Theory, postcolonialism, and Afrofuturism as its theoretical lenses to explain how race is constructed, deconstructed, and reimagined in society. The findings of this study suggest that *Black Panther* rejects colonial dominance through its depiction of Africa as efficient, wealthy, and technologically advanced. As the first film to feature an all-Asian cast in twenty-five years, *Crazy Rich Asians* celebrates Asian cultures in mainstream media. It further challenges Hollywood's hegemonic depictions of Asian and Asian American people and discusses issues within the Asian diaspora as it relates to race, class, and identity.

*Keywords: Black Panther, Crazy Rich Asians, film, race, identity, representation*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

While Hollywood has historically promoted the stories of white Americans, it continues to project inaccurate portrayals of minority groups through stereotypes and generalizations. Unfortunately, Hollywood has failed to reflect changing demographics in the United States; therefore, people are speaking out against the lack of diversity in Hollywood. In 2015, #OscarsSoWhite was created on Twitter and circulated through social media to address the lack of diversity in the Academy. As a result, people began to push for the production of more inclusive and equitable representations of racial and ethnic minorities in Hollywood films. This thesis project studies *Black Panther (BP)* and *Crazy Rich Asians (CRA)*, which are two Hollywood blockbuster films that predominantly feature writers, directors, and casts of color. Consequently, *BP* and *CRA*'s plots and characters provide a nuanced understanding of race in the United States by centering the perspectives of individuals within the African and Asian diaspora. In addition, an analysis of both films suggests how power can be reconceptualized in homogenous communities.

Increasing the exposure and visibility of people of color in film influences the way society understands race. However, creators of color have not received equal opportunities to produce and direct big-budget projects, thus their stories are never told. Therefore, it is crucial for marginalized individuals to tell their own stories as it provides them with the tools to fight back against oppressive forces driven by Eurocentric media. In reinserting authority over how their stories are told, people of color are better equipped to speak on their own experiences. For example, black creators generally project more accurate depictions of black life. Therefore, it is

critical for marginalized groups to have a platform to vocalize their experiences and interrogate the injustices that plague their communities.

In preparation for this project, I searched for Hollywood blockbuster films released within the last five years that feature casts of color. Although there were not many to choose from, both *BP* and *CRA* were released within months of each other and performed well in the box office. In addition, the timing of their releases coincides with monumental events that have impacted racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S., such as the election of President Donald J. Trump, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and the recent outbreak of Covid-19. This project contributes to Communication Studies and Rhetorical Studies because it seeks to uncover erased identities in Hollywood films. As Hollywood influences one's understanding of race in the United States, *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asian*'s inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities combat racism and xenophobia and reveal alternate ways in which power is manifested in society.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do equitable and inclusive films increase understanding about race in the United States?
2. How do *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asians* combat colonial dominance in the United States?
3. Since race is largely homogenous in *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asians*, how is power manifested; which identities become marked and (un)marked?
4. Whose voices are prioritized within the African and Asian diaspora and why?

5. How do Western expressions of Afrofuturism impact individuals across the African diaspora and whose stories are prioritized as a result?

### **Preview**

The remainder of chapter one includes a synopsis of both *BP* and *CRA* to provide the reader with a basic understanding of the plot and characters. Chapter two examines the context surrounding the release of both films, specifically focusing on how race and power are maintained through discourse in the United States. The context section also explores Hollywood's role in representing people of color. Chapter three uses critical rhetoric as a methodology in revealing how power functions in society. This method further provides a voice for communities of color that have been muted due to systemic racism in Hollywood. Chapter four reviews the current literature of Critical Race Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Afrofuturism. These theories address how race is constructed, deconstructed, and reimagined in society, and specifically brings attention to colonial dominance in American media.

Chapter five is a case study of *Black Panther* and explores how race and identity is manifested within the African diaspora. It also explains why and how *Black Panther* functions as a postcolonial and Afrofuturistic text. Chapter six is a case study of *Crazy Rich Asians*. This film celebrates Asian and Asian-American cultures in mainstream media, but also highlights issues surrounding race, class, and identity within the Asian diaspora. Finally, chapter seven is a conclusion of this study and focuses on how *BP* and *CRA* contribute to a greater understanding of race in the United States. It also demonstrates how both films combat racial dominance in the U.S. by using Hollywood as a mainstream platform from which to explicate the development of



racial minority characters. Lastly, the conclusion discusses how alternate identities, such as nation and class, are raced in homogenous societies.

This project uses the term ‘black’ to refer to people within the African diaspora, and ‘Asian’ to refer to people within the Asian diaspora. While these terms reference race, I use the terms ‘African American’ and ‘Asian American’ to indicate specific ethnic identities within the United States. Accordingly, the African characters in *BP* are acknowledged by their nationality as Wakandans, and the Asian characters in *CRA* living in Asia are referred to as Singaporeans and Chinese-Singaporeans. Lastly, third-person pronouns “we” and “our” are used to acknowledge my identity as an African American woman and as a member of the African diaspora.

### ***Black Panther (BP) Synopsis***

Directed by Ryan Coogler (2018), *BP* opens with a young boy asking his *baba* to tell him a bedtime story, specifically the story of “home.” *Baba* illustrates the legend of Wakanda, describing how a meteorite made of Vibranium struck the earth millions of years ago and affected all living creatures. Later, five tribes formed an alliance called Wakanda to stake a claim on the precious metal, but constant conflict ensued among the tribes. Consequently, Panther Goddess Bast pointed a warrior shaman to the Heart-Shaped Herb which gave him superpowers. He became the first Black Panther and the king of Wakanda. Although four of the tribes agreed to live under the Black Panther’s rule, the Jabari Tribe protested and retreated to the mountains. With Vibranium, Wakanda was able to become the most technologically advanced nation in the world despite the changes that happened outside of their region. In order to protect the country

and their Vibranium, Wakandans decided to hide in plain sight, and according to the legend, they are still hidden to this day.

The first official scene is set in Oakland, California, in 1992 where two men are planning a robbery. Once they hear a knock on the door, they rush to hide their guns. James, one of the men, looks through the peephole to see two African women who are bald, wearing African-inspired clothing, and carrying spears. The two women introduce T'Chaka, who is the Black Panther, king of Wakanda and N'Jobu's brother. N'Jobu is stationed in Oakland as a spy and must prove that he is Wakandan by displaying a tattoo on his inner bottom lip. T'Chaka asks N'Jobu why he betrayed Wakanda and informed Ulysses Klaue of where they hid their Vibranium. James, also known as Zuri, is also a Wakandan spy and has been reporting N'Jobu's crimes all along. Angered by James' betrayal, N'Jobu draws his weapon on him, but is killed by King T'Chaka instead. All of the Wakandans immediately flee the area in their aircraft, leaving N'Jobu's son behind.

The film shifts to the present day where T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman), the main character and protagonist, watches a BBC news report about a terrorist attack at the UN that kills his father, T'Chaka. Referring to Wakanda, the news reporter states, "Though it remains one of the poorest countries in the world fortified by mountain ranges and an impenetrable rainforest, Wakanda does not engage in international trade or accept aid." This news story reflects how Wakanda portrays itself to the rest of the world as impoverished, which prevents them from being noticed. Moments later, T'Challa and Okoye arrive in the Sambisa Forest in Nigeria to fight an unnamed terrorist group that has radicalized young boys into kidnapping Nigerian girls; Okoye is the leader of the Dora Milaje, an all female warrior group that protects the king. After

rescuing all of the girls, T'Challa, Okoye, and Nakia (a Wakandan spy) return to Wakanda to mourn the death of their king. On the way to Wakanda, their aircraft hovers over fields and mountains until it enters through a holographic portal and arrives inside of a metropolis, a city bustling with business, culture, and technology.

The following scene shows Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan), the antagonist, browsing the West African exhibit at the Museum of Great Britain in London, England. While walking through the exhibit he asks an expert questions about some of the artifacts. She explains that one of the axes is from the Fula Tribe in Benin from the seventh century, but then Killmonger corrects her saying that it was actually taken by British soldiers in Benin and was originally made from Vibranium in Wakanda. Nonetheless, he offers to take it off her hands. When the expert responds in a confused tone that it is not for sale, he challenges, "How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price?" She asks him to leave while collapsing from drinking her poisoned coffee. Just then, Klaue and a few men come in and kill all of the guards before swiping the Vibranium ax and fleeing the scene.

In the next scene, Wakanda holds a ceremony to crown a new king. Zuri, a Wakandan shaman, asks each tribe (Jabari Tribe, Golden Tribe, Border Tribe, River Tribe, Merchant Tribe, and Mining Tribe) if members of royal blood would like to challenge for the throne. M'Baku from the Jabari Tribe accepts the challenge to fight against T'Challa, but before the battle begins, T'Challa must drink from the Heart-Shaped Herb, a special flower that only grows in Wakanda, to strip himself of his supernatural powers. T'Challa wins the challenge and takes his late father's place as the king of Wakanda, which is the first time the audience hears the famous mantra, "Wakanda Forever."

As king, T'Challa must restore his powers with the Heart-Shaped Herb. In doing so, he is buried alive and sent to the Ancestral Plane where he witnesses his father being killed by a blast at the UN and then meets him in person. The Ancestral Plane is quiet and peaceful; it is sprinkled with trees and has the Northern Lights in the background. Multiple black panthers (the actual animal) rest in surrounding trees, but when T'Challa arrives, one hops off and morphs into his father, T'Chaka. T'Challa inquires about ways to best protect Wakanda, in which T'Chaka suggests that he surround himself with people he can trust. He continues, "You're a good man with a good heart and it's hard for a good man to be king."

T'Challa's second mission is to travel to Busan, South Korea, to retrieve the Vibranium that Klaue stole from the Museum of Great Britain. Led by Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o) and her connection to the decoy guards, T'Challa and Okoye find Klaue. T'Challa, Okoye, and Nakia follow him and his men through the streets of Busan until they capture him with the help of Agent Ross, a member of the CIA and longtime ally to T'Challa. While in custody, Agent Ross grills Klaue to find out why he stole the Vibranium. Klaue proceeds to tell him about Wakanda's mountains of Vibranium and how he only took a small piece of it. Vibranium is the strongest metal on Earth and powers everything in Wakanda. Agent Ross informs him that Wakanda is a Third World country and that he stole all of their Vibranium, but he later confronts T'Challa to ask for clarification. In the middle of the conversation, Killmonger blows down a wall to free Klaue and then shoots into the building hitting Agent Ross in the back. Once T'Challa chases after him, he sees Killmonger for the first time and spots a necklace with a ring hanging from it, a ring that resembles his own as a member of the Black Panther Tribe. Amidst the chaos, they decide to take Agent Ross back to Wakanda to heal him.

When T'Challa tells W'Kabi (leader of the Border Tribe) what happens, he argues that T'Challa should just take out Klaue; however, T'Challa feels as though this would go against his values as a leader. He battles with whether to continue in his father's footsteps or form his own path. Thus, he goes to the shaman for guidance and to ask him about Killmonger's ring. Zuri (Forest Whitaker) tells him about his previous life as a War Dog spy. While on mission, N'Jobu, Erik Killmonger's father, became invested in the community. Zuri states, "The hardships he saw there radicalized your uncle." In a flashback N'Jobu says to T'Chaka,

I observed for as long as I could. Their leaders have been assassinated. Communities flooded with drugs and weapons. They are overly policed and incarcerated. All over the planet our people suffer because they don't have the tools to fight back. With Vibranium weapons, they could overthrow every country and Wakanda could rule them all the right way.

Since King T'Chaka disagreed with his plan, N'Jobu helped Klaue steal Vibranium from Wakanda.

Throughout the film, Shuri (T'Challa's sister) assists everyone with the technology they need to run the country efficiently and defeat Wakanda's enemies. Using her inventions, she heals Agent Ross from his gunshot wound overnight. After waking up, he hops off of the operating table and walks around the laboratory in disbelief; he is amazed that he has been healed and is baffled by the fact that he is in Wakanda. He interjects, "All right, where am I?" in which Shuri responds, "Don't scare me like that colonizer!" He then poses several questions about Wakanda and the mechanics of Vibranium. At that moment, Okoye calls with the news

about Killmonger's arrival to the border with Klaue's body. Just when they think Killmonger may be Wakandan, Agent Ross informs them that "He's not a Wakandan. He's one of ours."

Members of the Border Tribe bring Killmonger before the committee to plead his case and he says, "I'm standing in your house serving justice to a man who stole your Vibranium and murdered your people. Justice your king couldn't deliver." When the committee asks what he wants, he retorts,

I want the throne. Y'all sittin' up here comfortable. Must feel good. It's about two billion people all over the world that looks like us. But their lives are a lot harder. Wakanda has the tools to liberate 'em all.

The committee declines his request and T'Challa declares that Wakanda's weapons should not be used to wage war on the world. T'Challa adds, "It is not our way to be judge, jury, and executioner for people who are not our own." Killmonger responds, "Not your own? But didn't life start right here on this continent? So ain't all people your people?" He finally reveals his identity as "N'Jadaka, son of Prince N'Jobu."

As the grandson of T'Chaka, T'Challa grants Killmonger's request to challenge for the throne. At the fight Killmonger states,

I lived my entire life waitin' for this moment. I trained, I lied, I killed just to get here. I killed in America, Afghanistan, Iraq. I took life from my own brothers and sisters right here on this continent. And all this death just so I could kill you.

Just as he is about to kill T'Challa, Zuri screams out his childhood name, "Erik! Stop. I am the cause of your father's death. Not him. Take me." At that moment, Killmonger recognizes him as

a family friend from long ago and says, "I'll take you both Uncle James." He stabs Zuri and throws T'Challa off of a cliff.

Now that Killmonger is the new king, he is able to drink from the Heart-Shaped Herb but instead of arriving in the Ancestral Plane, he arrives at his childhood home in Oakland, California. His father is trapped in an alternate place alone, detached from the rest of his ancestors. Placed in a vulnerable state, the audience sees Killmonger as a child. N'Jobu tells him, "The sunsets there are the most beautiful in the world. But I fear you still may not be welcome." After Erik Killmonger asks why, his father responds that they will say he is lost. Throughout this entire scene, Erik does not cry for the loss of his father because "Everybody dies. It's just life around here." To this, N'Jobu regrets not bringing Erik back to Wakanda since they are both abandoned in California without ancestral ties. Erik returns to his adult self and angrily states, "Well, maybe your home is the one that's lost. That's why they can't find us." At that moment, he wakes up from his hallucination, flustered from his experience and orders that the cultivators burn all of the remaining Heart-Shaped Herbs.

Fast-forward to Killmonger sitting on his throne he says,

You know, where I'm from when black folks started revolutions, they never had the firepower or the resources to fight their oppressors. Where was Wakanda? Yeah, all that ends today. We got spies embedded in every nation on Earth. Already in place. I know how colonizers think. So we're gonna use their own strategy against 'em. We're gonna send Vibranium weapons out to our War Dogs. They'll arm oppressed people all over the world so they can finally rise up and kill those in power. And their children. And anyone else who takes their side. It's time they know the truth about us! We're warriors! The

world's gonna start over, and this time, we're on top. The sun will never set on the Wakandan empire.

With T'Challa now dead, Ramonda (the Queen depicted by Angela Bassett), treks to Jabariland to plead for M'Baku's help in removing Killmonger from the throne. Nakia offers M'Baku the last Heart-Shaped Herb that she took right before the cultivators burned down the garden in exchange for his help. M'Baku refuses their offer but hands over T'Challa's comatose body. Right there, Ramonda prepares the herb and calls out to their ancestors to heal T'Challa. T'Challa meets his father in the Ancestral Plane and questions him about killing his uncle and covering up his cousin's existence. His father responds, "He was the truth I chose to omit... I chose my people. I chose Wakanda. Our future depended..." T'Challa interrupts,

You were wrong! All of you were wrong! To turn your backs on the rest of the world!

We let the fear of our discovery stop us from doing what is right! No more! I cannot stay here with you. I cannot rest while he sits on the throne. He is a monster of our own making. I must take the mantle back. I must! I must right these wrongs.

T'Challa comes out of the Ancestral Plane and is prompted to action. He wants to take back Wakanda from under Killmonger's rule. Meanwhile, Killmonger has ordered for weapons to be delivered to War Dogs stationed all over the world. However, a civil war ensues because some Wakandans are loyal to whoever sits on the throne while others are loyal to T'Challa. T'Challa finally meets Killmonger face-to-face and continues their battle. During their fight Killmonger explains,

The world took everything away from me! Everything I ever loved! But I'mma make sure we're even. I'mma track down anyone who would even think about being loyal to



you! And I'm gonna put they ass in the dirt right next to Zuri!

In a tussle, T'Challa stabs Killmonger out of self-defense. Stunned and with a dwindling breath, Killmonger speaks, "My pop said Wakanda was the most beautiful thing he ever seen. He promised he was gonna show it to me one day. You believe that? Kid from Oakland, running around believing in fairytales." T'Challa takes Killmonger's declining body to watch the sunset. "It's beautiful," Killmonger says. T'Challa offers to try to heal him but Killmonger asks, "Why? So you can just lock me up? Nah. Just bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships. 'Cause they knew death was better than bondage." With that, Killmonger withdraws the knife from his body and falls to his death and T'Challa becomes the king again.

After becoming king for the second time, T'Challa has a better understanding of how he wants to run his country. In the last scene, he escorts his sister to Oakland, California, where their father killed their uncle. He decides to purchase the whole block of buildings and turn them into the first Wakandan International Outreach Center, placing Nakia in charge of the social outreach and Shuri in charge of science and information exchange. Typically, after the ending credits, Marvel movies include an additional scene that reveals teasers for the Marvel films to come. In this particular scene, T'Challa delivers a speech to the United Nations in Vienna, Austria, offering to share Wakanda's resources with the world. With Nakia and Okoye by his side, he introduces himself as "T'Challa, son of T'Chaka, king of Wakanda" and continues,

For the first time in our history we will be sharing our knowledge and resources with the outside world. Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot. We must not. We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this earth should treat each other. Now more than ever the illusions of division threaten our very existence.

We all know the truth. More connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis the wise build bridges while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one, single tribe.

### ***Crazy Rich Asians (CRA) Synopsis***

Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) opens with the Young family walking into the Calthorpe Hotel after escaping a rainstorm in London in 1995. Although they are dressed in expensive clothing and carrying Louis Vuitton luggage, one employee says, "This is the Calthorpe. Private hotel." Eleanor (the mother played by Michelle Yeoh) tells the employee her name, as well as which room she has reserved in perfect English, but the man does not acknowledge her. Reginald Ormsby, the hotel manager, comes out to ask if there is any problem and claims that "she must have made a mistake." He suggests that she and her family find accommodations in Chinatown instead. She leaves the hotel to use the phone to contact her husband and then comes back in. After seeing her walking through the door, Ormsby threatens to call the police if she does not leave. Just then Lord Calthorpe comes downstairs to greet Eleanor and says, "As of this evening, my family's long history as custodians of the Calthorpe is ended. I'm selling the hotel to my dear friends, the Young family of Singapore."

Fast forward to the present day, Nick Young (Henry Golding) comes to pick up his girlfriend, Rachel Chu (Constance Wu), from her job as a professor at NYU and takes her to a fancy café in New York City. With much hope in his eyes, he asks if she will travel to Singapore with him to attend his best friend, Colin Koo's, wedding. Rachel's mother appears excited about her daughter meeting Nick's friends and family, so they go shopping together in preparation for her trip. As an Asian American, Rachel assumes that she will have no issues fitting in stating,

“They’re Chinese, I’m Chinese. I’m so Chinese [that] I’m an economics professor with lactose intolerance.” However, her mother argues that “your face is Chinese. You speak Chinese. But here, and here, you’re different.”

When Nick and Rachel arrive at the airport and an airline worker offers to check them into first class, Rachel explains that there must be a misunderstanding because they are economy people. All the while, Nick never reveals the fact that this is normal for him because of his family’s wealth. On the airplane, they receive their own private suite with free champagne and chairs that convert into beds. As Nick describes members of his family, there is no denying that they have money beyond imagination. One cousin, Alistair from Taiwan, is funding an entire movie. Another cousin, Eddie from Hong Kong, and his family are seen being photographed in their luxury condo. The third cousin, Astrid from Shanghai, is seen shopping at an expensive jewelry store where she purchases a pair of earrings for \$1.2 million. Astrid is married to a man named Michael who is not nearly as wealthy as she is. After returning from her shopping trip, she hides all of her purchases in different corners of the apartment. When she sees Michael, she tells him that Nick’s new girlfriend is coming to Singapore and that he would like her. But he responds, “Why? ‘Cause she’s a commoner like me?”

After landing in Singapore, Colin and Araminta pick Nick and Rachel up from the airport, take them to dinner, and invite Rachel to Araminta’s bachelorette party. The next day, Rachel goes to Peik Lin’s (Awkwafina) family’s house for dinner. When Peik Lin’s mother, Autie Neenah, gives Rachel a tour of their mansion she shares, “We were inspired by the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles,” in which Peik Lin adds, “And Donald Trump’s bathroom.” During dinner, the director plays with stereotypes. For example, Peik Lin’s father (Ken Jeong) pretends to

stumble through a thick Chinese accent and broken English and then proceeds to say, “I’m just kidding. I don’t have an accent. I’m just messing with you. No, I studied in the States too. Yeah, Cal State Fullerton.” When Peik Lin’s little sisters ask to go play on the trampoline, their father tells them that they have not finished their nuggets yet and that there are a lot of children starving in America. Conversations at the dinner table continue until the family realizes that Rachel is dating Nick Young and came to Singapore to attend Colin Koo’s wedding. Unbeknownst to Rachel, Peik Lin explains to her that the Young family is “old money,” and helps her get ready for Ah Ma’s (Nick’s grandmother) dinner party.

At the party, Rachel’s cultural and socio-economic background becomes visible. It is clear that she does not know how to act around rich people. For instance, she almost wears a cocktail dress to a formal party in which she needed a gown. In addition, she almost drinks out of a finger bowl until Nick stops her. When meeting Nick’s mother, Eleanor, she embraces her with a big hug, catching Eleanor off-guard. She even calls her Mrs. Young before correcting herself with a laugh, “Auntie... I’m still learning the lingo.” Next, Eleanor asks Rachel about her profession. After telling Eleanor that she teaches economics, it appears as though Nick chimes in to convince his mother that she is acceptable. He pushes, “And she’s brilliant. NYU’s youngest faculty member.” Eleanor appears distracted and somewhat disinterested in what Rachel is saying but asks if her parents are academics as well. Rachel discloses that her father died before she was born and that her mom did not go to college or speak English when she immigrated to the United States; nonetheless, her mother understands her passion for her career path. At that point, Eleanor responds, “Pursuing one’s passion. How American.”

When Rachel meets Nick's cousins, Eddie makes the assumption that her family also owns a big corporation and is disappointed when he finds that they do not. Even the aunts show their pity for her with comments like, "I'm sorry. Your mother's single." A family friend approaches her and asks, "What line of work is your father in?" Moments later, out of extreme nervousness and embarrassment Rachel accidentally spills red wine on Nick's cream suit. From there, another cousin runs to their rescue, ultimately becoming an ally for Rachel during her time in Singapore. He introduces himself as Oliver, one of the poorer family relations.

Now that Nick is back home, Eleanor encourages him to move back permanently to run the family's business. He says gently, "I'm just not ready yet. There's things in New York that I wanna see through." He initially thought his mother would be excited that the first girl he brought home was a Chinese professor, but to that Eleanor corrects him saying, "Chinese American." Afterwards, everyone returns to the party to watch a rare flower called *tan huas* bloom. Many of the attendees stare at Rachel as she walks through the crowd to meet Ah Ma for the first time. To make a good impression, Rachel speaks to Ah Ma in Mandarin.

In the next scene, Bernard (another cousin) charters helicopters to transport the groomsmen to the bachelor party on a boat in the middle of the ocean. The cargo ship is labeled "Ballin' Colin's Bachelor Party." There are DJs, swimming pools, fireworks, arcades, and open bars. At the party, the male cousins converse about their spouses' and girlfriends' wealth. One even asks Nick, "What's Rachel bringing to the table," as if a relationship with her was worthless since she did not come from money. Disappointed by the party, Nick and Colin find a way to escape to Rawa Island. While there, Nick shows Colin the ring he hopes to give Rachel when he proposes to her. Colin reminds him that the family expects him to return for good and take over

the family business, and if Rachel moves to Singapore, she would struggle daily to meet his family's unreasonable expectations.

Meanwhile, the bachelorette party is located at Samsara Island which is one of the resorts that Araminta's parents own. Out of jealousy, the women at the party try to humiliate Rachel by planting a dead fish on her bed and writing, "Catch this you gold digging bitch" on her window with red lipstick. Astrid notices her in distress and runs to comfort her. Later, Rachel tells Nick what happened at the party and how she feels about it. She is upset that he did not tell her more about his social circle prior to her arrival in Singapore.

In the following scene, the family gathers around to make dumplings by hand. The aunties speak of the importance of making good food for their children, "not like the *ang-mohs* microwaving macaroni and cheese for their own children. No wonder they put their parents in the old folks' home when they all grow up." The conversation moves in the direction of passing down tradition so that it does not disappear. On the surface, Eleanor is referring to dumpling-making, but in reality, she hints at Nick returning to Singapore to marry a wealthy woman. Once the family makes a joke in Mandarin and Rachel joins in with laughter, Auntie Alix asks her if she speaks the language. Rachel says that she does not but "it's just great seeing you guys all like this. When I was growing up it was just me and my mom, which I loved. But we didn't really have a big family like this. It's really nice." As Eleanor places her dumplings into a basket, Rachel compliments her on her emerald ring which leads to the story of how Nick's parents met. Eleanor takes this as an opportunity to further criticize Rachel. She talks about choosing to help her husband run a business and family and giving up on her goal of becoming a lawyer, as if that were some type of selfish act. She says,

For me, it was a privilege. But for you, you may think it's old-fashioned. It's nice you appreciate this house and us being here wrapping dumplings. But all this doesn't just happen. It's because we know to put family first, instead of chasing one's passion.

Just then, Ah Ma enters the room and compliments Rachel on her nose while Eleanor looks on resentfully. After sitting down, Ah Ma criticizes Eleanor on her dumplings, saying that she lost her touch.

Later, Eleanor approaches Rachel on the stairs to tell her the truth about her ring, which is that Nick's father had it made for her because Ah Ma would not give her the family ring. She says, "I wasn't her first choice. Honestly, I wasn't her second. I didn't come from the right family, have the right connections. And Ah Ma thought I would not make an adequate wife to her son." However, Ah Ma had good reason for thinking the way she did because:

I had no idea the work and the sacrifice it would take. There were many days where I wondered if I would ever measure up. But having been through it all, I know this much. You will never be enough.

She then walks away. Rachel does not tell Nick about the conversation and decides to vent to Peik Lin instead, so they both devise a plan to stand up to Eleanor by giving Rachel a makeover and a change of attitude. At the wedding, many people arrive in Rolls Royces. Peik Lin and Oliver escort Rachel down the red carpet where reporters, photographers, and paparazzi all compliment her new look.

In the car on their way to the wedding, Michael informs Astrid that he will need to go on a work trip on Monday. Astrid reminds him that Monday is their son's birthday and that he should "get someone else to handle it. Unless there's another reason you're out of town?"

Michael looks up from his phone indignantly, “What are you saying?” Astrid responds, “I know you’re having an affair. Let’s just get through the wedding, and deal with it after. I don’t wanna make a scene.” Michael retorts with, “You find out I’m having an affair with another woman, and you’re worried about making a scene?” He is annoyed by her caring so much about what others think of them, so he steps out of the Rolls Royce and walks away from the relationship.

As the guests arrive inside the chapel and take a look around, Auntie Alix mentions that Colin and Araminta spent \$40 million on the wedding. Auntie Felicity adds, “That’s too much. We’re Methodists. 20 million is our limit.” They stop in their tracks when they see Rachel walk through the door, but when Rachel greets them, Eleanor says that she cannot sit with them because their row is too full. Once everyone is seated, the procession begins and the wedding singer plays an acoustic version of “Can’t Help Falling in Love.” At the ceremony, Eleanor begins to truly realize that Nick and Rachel are meant for each other.

The reception is located at the Marina Bay Sands, and has lights, fireworks, food, and live entertainment. Everyone is having a good time until Ah Ma requests to speak with Rachel, forbidding her from being with her grandson. They all learn that Eleanor has hired a private investigator to look into Rachel’s family history. In reality, Rachel’s mother was married to a man in China, but cheated on him and got pregnant with Rachel. As a result, she ran away to the United States. Eleanor says, “We cannot be linked to this sort of family.” Rachel then says, “I don’t want to be a part of your family,” and runs to stay with Peik Lin’s family. She lays in her room depressed for days and does not come out to eat or to talk to anyone. All the while, Nick continuously calls and leaves her messages. To no avail, he decides to fly Rachel’s mother out to Singapore.



When her mother arrives, Rachel wants to know the truth about her father. Her mother said that her original husband was not a good man and would often hurt her. She grew close to a boy she knew in school, fell in love, and had his baby. She was then afraid that her husband would find out and kill her and the baby, so she ran to the United States. Although she always had a desire to reach out to Rachel's biological father, she was afraid that her husband would find her. Despite how Rachel has been hurt by the situation, her mother encourages her to talk to Nick before they leave. Nick apologizes for his family's behavior and proposes to her, promising to leave his old life and family behind and start anew in New York. Yet, Rachel turns him down.

Before leaving Singapore for good, Rachel invites Eleanor to play *mahjong*. She asks Eleanor why she expresses animosity towards her. Eleanor responds with a Hokkien phrase that means, "Our own kind of people," followed by "And you're not our own kind." Rachel assumes that it is because she did not grow up rich, but Eleanor clarifies that it is because she is "a foreigner. American. And all Americans think about is their own happiness." Eleanor believes that happiness "is an illusion. We understand how to build things that last. Something you know nothing about." She informs Eleanor that Nick proposed to her the day before and how she turned him down. She says,

I'm not leaving 'cause I'm scared or because I think I'm not enough. Because maybe for the first time in my life, I know I am. I just love Nick so much. I don't want him to lose his mom again. So I just wanted you to know that one day, when he marries another lucky girl who is enough for you, and you're playing with your grandkids while the *tan huas* are blooming and the birds are chirping, that it was because of me. A poor, raised by a single mother, low class, immigrant nobody.

Afterwards, Rachel lets Eleanor win the game and walks over to her mother, and then they both look at Eleanor and leave the building.

In the concluding scene, Eleanor talks with her son. Although the audience hears no dialogue, it appears that she apologizes to him for everything she has done. With his mother's blessing, Nick follows Rachel to the airport, onto the plane, and proposes to her with his mother's emerald ring. Finally, Nick convinces Rachel to stay one more night and surprises her with a huge engagement party on the top deck of the Marina Bay Sands hotel.

## Chapter 2: Context

2018 was an exciting and progressive time for films featuring actors, directors, and writers of color. On February 16, 2018, *Black Panther* was released to the box office and nearly six months later, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) was also released. Thinking about the prominence of film media in American life, it becomes more important to examine the unexamined and understand how it communicates and reinforces power. This section of the thesis discusses the context surrounding *Black Panther* (BP) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (CRA), focusing specifically on race and power. Before diving into each film, this section explores Hollywood's role in representing people of color. Next, it examines the significance of both films for people within the African and Asian diaspora. Following, it reviews issues surrounding xenophobia and the Trump Administration.

### Hollywood

Hollywood has a reputation for making dreams come true. Not only do Hollywood films impact the lives of their viewers but they also impact individuals involved in creating them. Americans' fascination with Hollywood films align with the myth of the American Dream; it communicates that because we are Americans living in America, we have an equal chance at achieving our goals and being successful. However, racial and ethnic representation is not equal in American media. Although Hollywood films are distributed globally, they have historically featured white actors, reflected Western life, and as a result, catered to white audiences. In an effort to appeal to a mainstream audience, Hollywood prioritizes white lives in the West and represents racial and ethnic minorities as secondary. This lack of prioritization leads to one-dimensional, stereotypical depictions of people of color (Eschholz, Bufkin, & Long, 2002).

While Hollywood films appear to be the ultimate medium for imagination, self-expression, and great storytelling, the process of creating blockbuster movies is incredibly formulaic and allows little room for creativity. Due to capitalism, film producers are motivated to create films that sell, so films featuring nonwhite casts have been categorized as niche (Eschholz, Bufkin, & Long, 2002). For example, films that typically feature all-black casts, like Tyler Perry's movies, are advertised to a black audience. As of recently, Hollywood film producers have recognized an increasing demand for more inclusive films. Movies created and produced by black filmmakers, like *Get Out* (2017) and *Girls Trip* (2017), are being marketed to a much wider audience, and have performed fairly well in the box office as a result (Smith, 2018).

### ***Academy Awards***

In 2015, #OscarsSoWhite generated discussions around the lack of diversity in films receiving Academy Awards. In reference to Chattoo (2018), the Academy Awards indicate a film's worth, thus communicating whether it deserves cultural attention. As of 2016, the Academy was 92% white and 75% male (Chattoo, 2018, p. 370). Only 2% of voters were black and Latino, while 1% was Native American (Bakare, 2015). People believed that the demographic makeup of the Academy contributed to which movies and directors received awards (Chattoo, 2018). For years, it seemed as though the Academy only acknowledged white male producers, which created a perpetual cycle that barred nonwhite writers and directors from showcasing their work to the public. After receiving criticism for its lack of diversity through #OscarsSoWhite, the Academy invited 683 film professionals, which shifted the demographic to 46% women and 41% people of color (Chattoo, 2018, p. 369-370).

Prior to changes made in the Academy, black nominees at the Oscars have more than doubled with each decade since the 1930s: during the 1930s-1940s there was one, in the 1950s-1960s there were six, in the 1970s-1980s there were sixteen, and in the 1990s-2000s there were thirty-three (Bakare, 2015). While the Academy has increased its efforts to become more inclusive, Latino and Asian nominees have consistently fallen below this trajectory. Since 2015, however, there has been one notable mention. In January 2020, Awkwafina won a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress in a Motion Picture - Comedy or Musical for her role in *The Farewell* (2019), becoming the first Asian-American actor to win a Golden Globe in this particular category. The fact that the Academy is still experiencing firsts in 2020 demonstrates the pressing need for achieving racial and ethnic equity in Hollywood.

### **Marvel's *Black Panther* (BP)**

As the eighteenth movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), *Black Panther* (BP) is the first mega-budget superhero film to feature a black director, black writers, and a predominantly black cast (Smith, 2018). *BP* was produced by Marvel Studios and Walt Disney Pictures, directed by Ryan Coogler, and written by Ryan Coogler, Joe Robert Cole, Stan Lee, and Jack Kirby. The 134-minute film is rated PG-13 and falls under the action, adventure, and sci-fi genre. As of April 20, 2018, *BP* was the third highest-grossing film in North America (Fitzpatrick, 2018). While the film had an estimated budget of \$200,000,000, it earned \$202,003,951 in its opening weekend (IMDb, n.d.-a). As of September 2019, the film grossed \$700,059,566 in the United States and \$1,346,913,161 worldwide, becoming a global success (Fitzpatrick, 2018; IMDb, n.d.-a). Upon the release of the first reviews, it received a 100% rating on Rotten Tomatoes (Smith, 2018).

The premier of *BP* inspired massive participation from people from many backgrounds and cultures. Its supporters included previous Marvel fans and members of the African diaspora who flocked to movie screenings in full support. Even black people who had never watched a Marvel film or were not fans of Marvel became fans of *BP*. Martin (2019) identifies the risk of producing an all-black film, arguing that it must be financially successful because its failure could prevent the production of other black films. Fortunately, *BP* marks a turning point in Hollywood because it proves that a cast predominantly consisting of people of color could be successful and valued among mainstream audiences (Khan, 2019). As a big-budget, wide-release blockbuster film, *BP* is situated as a product of popular culture; therefore, it appeals to different demographic segments, and not just to the black or Marvel audiences (Martin, 2019).

This film particularly serves the black community in a unique way. It discusses what it means to be black in the U.S. and across the globe and depicts issues surrounding modern-day black life (Smith, 2018). Jamil Smith, a film critic, explains that the release of *BP* was a chance for black people to feel “seen and understood” and for others to “see and understand” us (Khan, 2019, p. 97). This exciting moment emboldened fans to host watch parties and attend theaters in full Afrofuturistic-themed clothing (Smith, 2018). In addition, celebrities like Kendrick Lamar and Octavia Spencer purchased entire theaters so that children of color had the opportunity to see themselves represented on screen.

### ***Black Panther Comics***

Nama (2009) claims that superhero stories speak to us as humans. Superheroes present idealized projections of the self as more powerful and amazing. For example, during times of distress in U.S. history, comic writers depicted superheroes as defeating our enemies with

superhuman strength. On the other hand, superheroes also reinforce racial hierarchies that imagine white people claiming victory over evil forces (black people and other minorities). When people of color are not positioned as the enemies, they are characterized as victims. Black superheroes offer a science fiction version of blackness that challenge conventional notions of the black identity. Representing the intersection of “race, science, speculative fiction, black culture, African tradition and technology,” black superheroes serve as Afrofuturistic metaphors that reimagine the black identity in nuanced ways (Nama, 2009, p. 136). Black superheroes also highlight issues of inequality and racial subjectivity in the U.S.

Marvel’s *Black Panther* film is based on a long history of comic books. Black Panther was first introduced in *Fantastic Four* no. 52 and 53 in July 1966 where King T’Challa gives the Fantastic Four a technologically advanced vehicle that runs on magnetic levitation (Nama, 2009; Posada, 2019; Staples, 2018). However, only months after the character’s introduction, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was established in Oakland, CA. It was initially a vehicle for protecting black people from police brutality, but later developed into a Marxist revolutionary group (Smith, 2018; Staples, 2018). To avoid connotations with the Black Panther Party, Marvel briefly changed the comic’s name to the Black Leopard. However, Marvel eventually changed the name back to the Black Panther in *Avengers* #105 to prevent disinterest and cancellation.

Throughout *Black Panther*’s existence, several writers have altered the plot and characters with each rendition. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Civil Rights Movement placed racial politics front and center. Thus, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby wanted to create a black character to bring more attention to civil rights issues and correct representations of superheroes in the past (Gaiter, 2018; Nama, 2009). From 1977-1979, Jack Kirby was replaced by Ed Hannigan, Jerry

Bingham, and Roger Stern. Peter B. Gillis, Denys Cowan, Dwayne Turner, and Don McGregor were the creators of smaller installments through the late 1980s and most of the 1990s.

Christopher Priest introduced a few new characters during his time as writer from 1998-2004.

Following, Reginald Hudlin, film director and former president of BET, wrote for the comic from 2005-2009 (Posada, 2019). His rendition served as a positive example of black science fiction by the way it represented a future where black people were no longer determined by racism and colonialism. He interpreted T'Challa as both intelligent and physically strong and drew more attention to Wakanda's technological power and rich, natural resources (Posada, 2019).

*BP* comics were momentarily cancelled after the second issue of *Black Panther and the Crew* in 2016. Nonetheless, Marvel recruited new writers, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Roxanne Gay, and Yona Harvey, to revive the comic. Ta-Nehisi Coates, author and columnist for the *Atlantic*, is the current writer for *BP*. His rendition focuses more on Wakandan politics and incorporates topics of race and power (Posada, 2019). In an interview he stated,

The question about race is ultimately just a question about power, it really is. It's how human beings organize themselves around power, how they exploit, how they use it. That is at the heart of the comic book...The dude's in this mythical country Wakanda where everybody's black. So obviously you don't have the same context of race. But certainly the issues of power, of organizing power, are still there. (Peters, 2018).

### ***Science Fiction (SF) & Afrofuturism***

Science fiction (SF) is known for having flexible conventions; writers can break the rules, bend reality, and essentially create whatever their imagination can conjure. A few common



themes found in classic SF stories include space exploration, science, and technology. In regard to space exploration, SF accesses the Western cowboy myth as it relates to Western expansion and applies it to the discovery of space as the 'final frontier' (Gaiter, 2018, p. 307). Next, SF stories typically prioritize science over religion and the supernatural; SF positions science and religion as mutually exclusive. Lastly, SF incorporates revolutionary technology that sometimes exists only in theory but not in reality. Despite the endless possibilities of SF, black people have historically been absent from much of the genre (Nama, 2009). Therefore, in 1992, Mark Dery brought attention to the Afrofuturism movement because he was concerned that black people would be disregarded in the future the same way that we have been removed from history (Staples, 2018).

The *Black Panther* comics embody SF and Afrofuturism through its combination of African art and mythology, science and technology, and space exploration. As *BP* reevaluates stereotypical depictions of Africa in the media, it depicts a world where black people have monetary, military, and technological power that surpasses that of the Western world (Smith, 2018). *BP* imagines an African king that is not tribal, primitive, or victimized. The story takes place in Wakanda, an African utopia that has never been colonized; therefore, its people live in a country that is politically, spiritually, and technologically advanced. Wakandans achieve their own liberation without assistance from the West (Posada, 2019). Serving as a counter memory due to its dictatorial location as the center of Africa, *BP* symbolizes African superiority over the West and is no longer a victim of institutionalized racism (Posada, 2019).

### **Costumes.**

One major part in creating *BP*'s Afrofuturistic look is through costumes. Costume designer Ruth E. Carter illustrates Afrofuturism by infusing traditional tribal pieces with modern African elements that speak to the science fiction genre. Carter has worked on several iconic television and film projects over the decades that include *Malcolm X* (1992), *What's Love Got To Do With It* (1993), and *Roots* (1977) (The New Yorker, 2018). She has been inspired by Afrofuturism since the 1980s when she worked with Spike Lee on the set of *Do The Right Thing* (1989). In preparation for *BP*, she conducted research by sending shoppers to South Africa and Ghana to look for original pieces to incorporate into her *BP* costumes. She also supplements with 3D printed pieces for a more futuristic look (Vanity Fair, 2018).

In the beginning of the film, Ramonda wears a shoulder mantle and an isicolo (a married South African women's hat) made from 3D printed patterned lace (Vanity Fair, 2018). In that same scene, Shuri wears a t-shirt with an adinkra symbol printed on the front. Adinkra symbols were created by the Ashanti people and used to represent a concept, so the particular symbol on Shuri's t-shirt represents purpose. The Dora Milaje are wearing neck rings and arm rings from the Ndebele tribe in South Africa and the beadwork featured on their costume is inspired by the Turkana tribe in Kenya. Zuri is wearing an open-shaped drape commonly worn by Nigerian men; its blue color is inspired by the Tuareg people who inhabit Libya, Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. The leader of the Merchant Tribe is wearing Ethiopian crosses on her garment and a turban that has the same Tuareg symbols found on Zuri's clothing. The Border Tribe is covered in blankets with adinkra symbols printed on them in Vibranium ink. The River Tribe's attire is completely based on the Suri people. Members of the Mining Tribe are wearing wigs that are

generally worn by the Himba people located near Namibia and Angola (Vanity Fair, 2018). To make it more Afrofuturistic, all of the costumes have pieces of Vibranium built into them and all of the characters are equipped with kimoyo beads.

### ***Black Fandom***

When thinking about graphic novels, fandom comes to mind; however, there has been little study to address the correlation between fandom and race. People usually imagine fans to be mostly cis-gendered straight white men, which creates a generalized, normalized fan (Martin, 2019). Therefore, Martin (2019) explores the idea of black fandom through four interlocking discourses that include must-see blackness, economic consumption, pedagogical properties, and culture industry. First, must-see blackness is the idea that black fans feel a civic duty to see blackness in the media. Second, economic consumption describes how black fans recognize the risks involved when they see blackness in white spaces. Third, pedagogical properties question if the fan object is fit to be a role model. These three elements combine to fit the fourth discourse, which is the desire to create and support blackness as a culture industry.

Not only does the story of the Black Panther captivate fans from a range of racial and ethnic identities, the mass excitement over the film and comics coincide with Martin's (2019) classification of black fandom. First, black audiences considered it their civic duty to see black stories on screen. Second, the premier of *BP* prompted viewers to support financially to ensure that similar projects in Hollywood continue in the future. For example, patrons purchased entire theaters to financially support and provide opportunities for others to see the film. As a result, *BP* was wildly successful in the box office in its opening weekend, and as of March 2020, it remains one of the highest-grossing films of all time (IMDb, n.d.-a).

Considering its pedagogical properties, *BP* is filled with role models, from King T'Challa to strong black female representations like Okoye and Nakia. These characters show how black people can be strong and intellectual just like many of the white male superheroes featured in Marvel films. Finally, *BP* indicates the desire to support blackness as a cultural product. Since its premier, Marvel and other companies have created alternative products from *BP* references. For example, rapper Kendrick Lamar released a *BP* soundtrack. Also, department stores sell *BP* fan merchandise such as clothing, toys, and kitchenware. To increase the film's accessibility, the movie is shown in a media loop. Media loops recycle media messages in a new context so that they can be re-experienced; films move from the big screen to the small screen and vice versa (Eschholz, Bufkin, & Long, 2002). *BP* is now available on cable television, Netflix, and Disney Plus, bringing this film to a much larger audience than its original viewers who saw it in theaters.

### ***BP's Actors***

*BP* features noteworthy actors such as Angela Bassett, Forest Whitaker, Lupita Nyong'o, Michael B. Jordan, and Chadwick Boseman. After attending the Yale School of Drama, Angela Bassett moved on to star in iconic television, film, and stage roles (Biography, 2019a). Some of her major films include *Malcolm X* (1992), *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), and many more. She was nominated for an Academy Award and Emmy Award, but won a Golden Globe Award for her role in *What's Love Got To Do With It* (1993). Next, Forest Whitaker is an actor, producer, and director, directing films like *Waiting to Exhale* (1995) (Biography, 2019c). He won an Academy Award for his role in *The Last King of Scotland* (2006). Some of his major film and television roles include *Fast Times at Ridgmont High* (1982), *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999), *The Butler* (2013), and many more.

Lupita Nyong'o began her career as a director and producer for a documentary entitled *In My Genes* (2009). After starring in a television series called *Shuga*, she went on to play in *12 Years a Slave* (2013), in which she won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in 2014. Since then, she has played in many notable films that include *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), *Queen of Katwe* (2016), and *Us* (2019) (Biography, 2019d). Another breakout star includes Michael B. Jordan who began acting in television shows such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Friday Night Lights*. In 2013, he starred in his first movie, *Fruitvale Station*, and continued on to film *Creed* (2015) and *Creed II* (2018). Some of his more recent films include *Fahrenheit 451* (2018) and *Just Mercy* (2019) (Biography, 2019e). Chadwick Boseman began as a television actor as well and played in recurring roles on *Lincoln Heights*, *ER*, *Lie to Me*, and *Cold Case* (Biography, 2019b). Later, he moved to film to depict Jackie Robinson in *42* (2013), James Brown in *Get on Up* (2014), and an NYPD detective in *21 Bridges* (2019). After his legendary role in *Black Panther*, he was named Time's list of the 100 most influential people in the world (Fitzpatrick, 2018).

### ***Nonwhite Representation in Marvel Films***

Despite the Marvel Cinematic Universe's (MCU) 10-year span, the company did not spotlight a superhero of color until *BP*. T'Challa is originally introduced in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and later appears in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). Although he is not the sole superhero of color to receive screen time, he is the first to receive his own movie. *War Machine* is the first superhero of color and African American character featured in MCU films. He first appears in *Iron Man* (2008) played by Terrence Howard, and later in *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Iron*

*Man 3* (2013), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) played by Don Cheadle.

The second superhero of color, Falcon (Anthony Mackie), first appears in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). He later reappears in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Ant-Man* (2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Following, Wong (Benedict Wong) is introduced as a Chinese monk in *Dr. Strange* (2016), and later redeems his role in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Lastly, Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) is a spy and the director of S.H.I.E.L.D. Fury's character functions much like a superhero and is present in most Marvel films. While War Machine, Falcon, Wong, and Nick Fury are featured as fundamental characters, they were never the stars. Therefore, *BP* is the first film in which audiences receive insight into the background and dynamic characterization of a nonwhite superhero.

Mulkerin (2018) created a chart to address how often people of color have received prominence in Marvel movies thus far. His chart categorizes people by racial identity using the labels 'white' and 'nonwhite.' He found that nonwhite actors were significantly underrepresented in Marvel films. For instance, *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) showed some improvement by having an equal representation of white and nonwhite actors. The number of nonwhite actors were higher than white actors in *BP*. However, in some of the earlier MCU films such as *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) and *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), there were no nonwhite actors. Although numbers of racial representation have increased over time, they are not equal, nor do they reflect Marvel's audience, so Marvel still has work to do in increasing racial equity. According to Mulkerin's (2018) data, 45 out of 69 actors who have received billing have been

white. Excluding *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel* (2018), every single Marvel film has starred a white man. Mulkerin's next chart sought to examine the racial makeup of Marvel's writers and directors. His data illustrates that 90.7% are white and 9.3% are nonwhite. There have only been a few writers and/or directors of color that include Hawk Ostby, Taika Waititi, Ryan Coogler, and Joe Robert Cole.

### **Launching a Movement Through *Crazy Rich Asians* (CRA)**

*Crazy Rich Asians* (CRA) was directed by Jon M. Chu, written by Peter Chiarelli and Adele Lim, and based on a novel written by Kevin Kwan. The movie was filmed completely in Singapore and Malaysia and produced by Warner Bros., SK Global, Starlight Culture Entertainment, Color Force, and Ivanhoe Pictures (IMDb, n.d.-b; TODAY, 2018). The 120-minute film is rated PG-13 and falls under the genre of comedy, drama, and romance (IMDb, n.d.-b). It had an estimated budget of \$30,000,000 and earned \$26,510,140 in its opening weekend. Overall, *CRA* grossed \$174,532,921 in the United States and \$238,532,921 worldwide. Prior to its release, it received a 100% on Rotten Tomatoes (BUILD Series, 2018).

The success of *CRA* is often compared to that of Marvel's *Black Panther* (Abad-Santos, 2018). As the highest-grossing romantic comedy in a decade, GQ claims that it is "proof that people have been thirsting for Asian-American stories from a film industry bereft of them" (Abad-Santos, 2018; Lhooq, 2018). Asian Americans are just now seeing themselves represented in romantic comedies on television and film. Some of the programs include *Selfie* (2014-15), *The Big Sick* (2017), *The Mindy Project* (2012-17), *Master of None* (2015), *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), and *Always Be My Maybe* (2019) (Lee, 2018). Not only were these

television shows and films released within the last decade, but a good portion of them were released on Netflix as original content.

*CRA*'s director, Jon M. Chu is known for directing several successful films and television/streaming shows such as *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* (2013), *In The Heights* (2020), *Good Trouble* (2019 - present), *Home Before Dark* (2020 - present), and many more (Ho, 2018). In preparation for *CRA*, Chu scouted Asian actors from all over the world, searching for both experienced and novel talent. Afterwards, he received offers to produce the film from Warner Brothers and Netflix; however, he closed the deal with Warner Brothers claiming,

It's important for Hollywood studios to put a movie like this on the big screen because it sends a message. It sends a message across the world. Cinema is still cinema. And it says, when you put a piece in a museum, it anoints it as special. It anoints it as something worth your time and energy. (Talks at Google, 2018).

Similar to the significance of *BP*, Chu's decision to place *CRA* in theaters heralds it as a movie worth watching. Therefore, he wanted every aspect of *CRA* to be of high quality. To ensure that all of the Chinese-Singaporean cultural references were accurate, he sent his screenwriters on research trips throughout Asia and invited *mahjong* experts to teach the cast how to play the game (Ho, 2018).

### ***Kevin Kwan's Novel***

Based on Kevin Kwan's novel by the same title, *CRA* is loosely inspired by his own upbringing as a member of one of the wealthiest families in Singapore (Govani, 2017; Ho, 2018). His novels are popular among Asian and non-Asian audiences alike (Ho, 2018). Interestingly, Kwan claims to have written *CRA* for a North American audience to give them insight into



Singapore's super rich, and as a result, he has sold more than one million copies in over 20 different languages. In 2016, Kwan agreed to turn his international bestseller into a film in the wake of #OscarsSoWhite (Sperling, 2018).

### ***CRA's Actors***

*CRA* features a mixture of well-known and newer actors that include Michelle Yeoh, Constance Wu, Ken Jeong, Awkwafina, and Henry Golding. Michelle Yeoh is legendary in the Asian community for her iconic roles. In 1983, she won the title of Miss Malaysia and then later moved to Hong Kong with the dream to study martial-arts and play in action films (Saraiya, 2019). Since then, she has played in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005). After her role in *CRA*, she has played in *Last Christmas* (2019) and in CBS's *Star Trek: Discovery* and *Star Trek: Short Treks* as Lieutenant Philippa Georgiou (Saraiya, 2019). Actor Constance Wu starred in the hit ABC television show *Fresh Off the Boat* and continued to play dynamic characters like Destiny in *Hustlers* (2019). Another actor, Ken Jeong, began as a doctor and later became a comedian and actor, landing his own television show on ABC called *Dr. Ken* (BUILD Series, 2018).

This film launched the careers of lesser known actors as well. After making her debut in *CRA*, Awkwafina starred in several projects such as *Ocean's 8* (2018), *The Farewell* (2019), in which she won a Golden Globe Award for, and her own television show on Comedy Central called *Awkwafina Is Nora from Queens* (Grady, 2020). Another star from the film, Henry Golding, debuted his acting career on *CRA* as well. Lhooq (2019) states that Golding dropped out of school at the age of 16 to work at a salon, and then later moved to Kuala Lumpur to host a travel show. Before his big break, Golding was discovered by an accountant from Jon M. Chu's

casting office and was connected via a mutual friend on Facebook. Since then, Golding has acted in newer Hollywood films such as *A Simple Favor* (2018), *Monsoon* (2019), *Last Christmas* (2019), and *The Gentlemen* (2020).

### ***Cultural Significance & Asian Representation***

While people of Asian descent make up 60% of the world's population, they are not represented as such in Hollywood films (Talks at Google, 2018; TimeTalks, 2018). In fact, Asian-American actors are given less than 5% of speaking roles (Lee, 2018). Instead, American films have completely underrepresented and misrepresented Asian people through stereotypical characterizations and whitewashing, which is when white actors are cast to play nonwhite characters (Nguyen, 2017; TimeTalks, 2018). For example, within the last few years white actors who have played Asian roles include Scarlet Johansson in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), Emma Stone in *Aloha* (2015), and Tilda Swinton in *Dr. Strange* (2016) (Sperling, 2018). Similarly, an industry executive suggested that Rachel Chu's character be rewritten as a Caucasian character in *CRA*, but Kwan refused this request (Lee, 2018; Tseng-Putterman, 2018). *CRA* thus became the first film to feature an all-Asian cast in 25 years since 1993's *Joy Luck Club* (TODAY, 2018; Tseng-Putterman, 2018). This beautiful Hollywood film has gathered actors from across the Asian diaspora to celebrate Asian cultures and to spotlight issues of privilege, immigration, and the disconnect between Asians and Asian Americans (Tseng-Putterman, 2018).

Since Asians have not been properly represented in Hollywood media, the premier of *CRA* touched the Asian community worldwide. Michelle Yeoh, who plays the matriarch of the story, shared her feelings about the film in a 2018 interview on the TODAY Show:

I'm so proud to be part of this. It's a long time coming. All the things that you said

before, it's so true. But you know to be represented. We're not just a token for diversity...to be real representation means that you have a meaning, character that has hopes and dreams, and in *Crazy Rich Asians* that's what we all have. It's so diverse, but at the same time it's got heart, it's about love, it's about family. And I think it really shows the other side of the Asians to our friends around the world and it will be very impactful because it's a studio movie. It's not just an indie film on TV. So, I think that will inspire more behind the scenes, in front of the camera and I look at these young people in awe. Seriously, they are just so brilliant and you're right. This is the best romantic comedy 'cuz we're not going to make a difference if the movie itself is not good, and Jon Chu did a fabulous job. (TODAY, 2018).

Yeoh brings attention to the importance of releasing a film like *CRA* in the way that it did, through Hollywood. It is in agreement with Chu's comment about the act of putting a film in theaters heralding it as important and worth mainstream attention. The hope is that *CRA* continues to open doors for newer projects featuring Asian diasporic stories. Constance Wu, who plays Rachel Chu, penned a message on Instagram explaining how she never expected to star in television and film projects depicting the stories of Asian Americans (Ramos, 2018). As a longtime advocate for Asian representation in Hollywood, Wu fights for Asian-American women who are told to be grateful for any role they receive even if the role objectifies them (Ho, 2018). Because of this, she argues that Jon M. Chu started a movement by inspiring the creation of new stories (Ramos, 2018). Under his direction, *CRA* was totally different from any other project because all of the cast members on set shared the same commitment for representation (Ho, 2018).

During several interviews, the cast members shared their thoughts about Asian representation in Hollywood. Awkwafina, in particular, feels a responsibility to discuss race and will continue to do so until racial equity is achieved in the industry. She states, “The way we are represented in media directly affects how we get treated in real life” (TimeTalks, 2018). She later adds that stereotypical depictions of Asians and Asian Americans on screen also dictate how the public views them. She poignantly offers an explanation for why she believes Asian actors take on stereotypical roles in the first place, stating that they take the roles available to them at that given time. Nonetheless, the hope is that writers create more dimensional characters over time and then offer those roles to Asian and Asian-American actors.

### ***Criticisms Concerning Representation***

While the premier of *CRA* was a groundbreaking moment for many in the Asian community, it came with some criticisms concerning representation, prompting several actors to defend the film. Many critics question the director’s decision to cast Henry Golding, who is half English and half Malaysian, as the lead. They feel that Golding’s casting perpetuates the stereotype that “full-blooded” Asian men cannot be romantic (Lee, 2018; Talks at Google, 2018). To that, director Jon M. Chu states that the story is about a man from Singapore living a British life and that Henry Golding is also from Singapore living a British life.

Golding also defends his presence as the lead by explaining that he, like many people, has struggled with his identity growing up. He felt that he was not British enough nor Malaysian enough but became proud of his heritage and refused to let that stop him. At the end of the day, he argues that he was the right man for the job. Chu continues by stating, “I blame the system itself... It’s not the person who’s been victimized over and over again... It’s a shame that one

movie is supposed to define everybody's experience. That's just an unfair idea" (Talks at Google, 2018). He believes that filmmakers and writers should create more representative characters to broaden the playing field and considers *CRA* to be one step closer towards racial equity in Hollywood.

Critics also claim that South and Southeast Asians are underrepresented in the film (Fan, 2018). *CRA* includes Chinese, Japanese, and Korean actors as main characters, but the only South and Southeast Asians represented are guards armed with bayonets (Fan, 2018; Tseng-Putterman, 2018). This becomes problematic because the only South Asian characters are depicted as servants and lower-class workers. The public recognized the lack of South and Southeast Asian characters after seeing the original trailer and then flocked to Twitter with the hashtags #CrazyRichEastAsians and #CrazyRichEastLight-SkinnedAsians (Lee, 2018). The Asian diaspora encompasses Asian identities from all over the world, yet the term 'Asian' is often conflated with East Asians (China, Japan, Korea, etc.) and excludes South Asians (India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, etc.), Southeast Asians (Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, etc.), and West Asians (Armenia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, etc.). Additionally, this exclusion disregards the global dispersion of Asian people who have since taken on new national identities. These ideas are reinforced through discursive practices and influence how Americans understand and regard people of Asian descent.

One last criticism contends that *CRA* exoticizes Asians by using affluence to sell diversity to mainstream American audiences (Abad-Santos, 2018; Fan, 2018; Tseng-Putterman, 2018). Tseng-Putterman (2018) adds that the film imposes whiteness by abiding by Western cultural norms as to not make race an issue. She believes that *CRA* "embraces a message of

white-Asian equivalence by distancing itself from the “wrong” kind of Asians” and essentially swaps the Chinese-Singaporean characters out for whites in a racial hierarchy. Contrary to Tseng-Putterman, however, Fan (2018) argues that movies starring white leads do not feel a responsibility to tell everyone’s story; therefore, it is unfair to expect *CRA* to do so. Constance Wu agrees that the film does not represent all Asians, but expresses the importance for similar projects overall, ultimately arguing that the Asian community must start somewhere (TimeTalks, 2018).

Although *CRA* garnered a few negative responses from its audiences, its release accomplishes a few things: first, it brings attention to new Asian and Asian-American storytellers who could revolutionize the industry; second, it institutes a conversation about how roles are allocated in Hollywood; third, it proves that films depicting Asian and Asian-American stories can indeed resonate with a mainstream audience. This film’s success can ultimately lead to the creation of newer films (Abad-Santos, 2018; Lee, 2018), which is why Chu confidently declares, “This is not just a movie but a movement” (Talks at Google, 2018).

### ***The Rise of Mandarin***

Language and power are inextricably linked and serve as the transmission for cultural knowledge (Ding, 2008). There are over 1,500 dialects spoken in China that are more distinct from one another than European languages (French, 2005). Therefore, there was a push to unite China using one language (French, 2005; Ong, 1999). The Chinese government chose to promote Mandarin because it has the most speakers worldwide, even though its speakers are mostly natives of China (Ding, 2008). In 2001, the Chinese government mandated that Mandarin would be used in all mass media, government offices, schools, and public events (Ding, 2008; French,

2005). Synonymous with China's economic and political goals, Beijing's efforts to promote Mandarin language is perceived as a form of dialectical supremacy, a way to wield power and impose their cultural values onto other regions in China. By 2001, all new laws were written in Chinese, candidates were required to pass a Mandarin test to enter China's Civil Service, and teachers were required to achieve a certain level of efficiency in Mandarin (Ding, 2008).

In 1987, the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCFL) sought to harmonize and promote the spread of Chinese language abroad (Ding, 2008). The Chinese government wanted to popularize Mandarin Chinese worldwide in a systematic way, so they established a network of Chinese learning centers called Confucius Institutes. By 2010, there were over 500 Confucius Institutes all over the world. Benton and Gomez (2014) claim that Chinese parents would send their children there for utilitarian reasons, which were to connect with the rise of China. Due to China's increase in commercial value, more foreigners are learning Mandarin as well (Ding, 2008). The British Prime Minister projected that China would be the world's largest economy; therefore, schools in the UK are ditching modern foreign language teaching and moving toward Mandarin Chinese to help its citizens develop better relations with their business partners in China (Pérez-Milans, 2015).

### ***Education & Class***

In postcolonial Southeast Asia, middle and upper-middle class families have been educated in Western countries such as Australia, Great Britain, Canada and the U.S. After the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, these families began sending their children to study abroad, which has almost become a rite of passage for young people from wealthy families (Ong, 1999). For example, Hong Kong was a destination for Chinese refugees during British rule

(1842-1997) (Ong, 1999). To achieve upward mobility, Chinese refugees made it their goal to learn the cultural capital that would facilitate educational and occupational success in the West. Therefore, families from Hong Kong immigrated to Britain to attend its preparatory schools and later sent their children to attend American universities. Ong (1999) refers to this particular form of migration as “the China tide,” which describes how over 1,000 emigrants left China to attend college in the U.S., Australia, and Canada while their parents focused on buying real estate (p. 95). Chinese families believe that buying property helps to diversify their portfolios. In addition to purchasing a home, families also take up residence with another family member until they can obtain a green card. This form of cultural capital (education, degrees, property, and green cards) are the means by which Chinese immigrants seek acceptance from their host societies.

### ***Immigration, Generation & Power***

There are three waves of Chinese immigration. The first wave began in the late 19th century (Benton & Gomez, 2014). Many early Asian immigrants came to the U.S. from China, Japan, the Philippines, Korea, and India through recruitment programs and settled in rural American towns, but many were rejected socially due to laws inspired by anti-Asian sentiments (Liu, 2012). During the second wave of immigration that began around 1949, there was a repatriation that led Chinese immigrants to return back to China to help build socialism. Additionally, Chinese migrants moved to other places around the world such as Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Latin America (Benton & Gomez, 2014). Poor leadership in China also drove citizens to immigrate to the West. Mao Zedong’s leadership led to the Great Chinese Famine that killed 20-45 million people and a civil war that persecuted anyone who



displayed Western views (AJ+, 2017). Lastly, the third wave of immigration began in the late 20th century and continues today (Benton & Gomez, 2014). The different waves of immigration meet and interact in interesting ways due to segmented immigration, which is when generations behave differently than other generations. Sometimes conflict arises due to tensions between upward mobility and the inability to escape poverty. Therefore, mobility influences how future generations choose to identify.

First generation Chinese immigrants hold a deep connection to China. Second generation are local-born and are entitled to citizenship. They move between ethnic spheres and have ties to more than one culture. Benton and Gomez (2014) argue that second generation Chinese assimilate in one of three ways. They may assimilate into the white middle class, into the underclass, or they may achieve economic advancement at the same time as preserving their immigrant community's values and networks. Many second-generation Chinese are easily able to move between social groups; thus, they strive to construct new forms of identity by mixing their parents' cultures with their own place of birth. The third generation are much more comfortable with their national identities (American, Australian, Canadian, British, or Malaysian). They are more ambivalent with their Chinese roots and choose to identify on their own terms. In the U.S., Chinese Americans report being American just as much as whites. On the other hand, some Chinese Americans choose to re-identify as Asian American, removing the hyphenated Chinese identity to achieve a pan-ethnic Asian identity. This renewed interest in reclaiming their Chinese identity indicates new ways of belonging.

## **Xenophobia & The Trump Administration**

Asians and Asian Americans have experienced violence, mistreatment, and xenophobia in the history of the United States. As of January 2020, however, people of Asian descent have been targeted due to the outbreak of Covid-19. In light of the current pandemic, President Donald Trump and members of the GOP have, on numerous occasions, referred to Covid-19 as the “Chinese virus” (Escobar, 2020; Kim, 2020). This particular rhetoric is damaging because it fuels racism by distancing Asian and Asian-American people as inferior and diseased (Scott, 2020). Labeling minority groups is not novel behavior from President Trump. Common themes found in his messages support the restoration of racial hierarchies and white supremacy. In addition, many of his messages display an anti-immigration sentiment in the U.S. (Avi Brooks, 2018; Escobar, 2020). For instance, he has referred to Mexicans as “rapists” and to nonwhite nations as “shithole countries,” which is another way of ‘othering’ groups of people in society (Kim, 2020; Smith, 2018).

According to Scott (2020), scientists try to avoid naming viruses after people, places, and animals so as not to stigmatize its victims, hence the name Covid-19. However, the Trump Administration has refused to refer to this deadly virus by its scientific name and continues to target individuals, deflecting any blame from the United States and placing it onto China. A tweet from March 18, 2020, reads,

I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the “borders” from China - against the wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News new narrative is disgraceful & false! (Scott, 2020).

In this tweet, President Trump uses the term, “Chinese Virus” to suggest that its spread came from the Chinese border. Yet, he does not mention how the virus may have spread from other countries like Italy at the time. Later, President Trump altered his use of the derogatory term in a tweet posted on March 23, 2020, that states,

It is very important that we totally protect our Asian American community in the United States, and all around the world. They are amazing people, and the spreading of the Virus is NOT their fault in any way, shape, or form. They are working closely with us to get rid of it. WE WILL PREVAIL TOGETHER! (Kim, 2020).

He calls for the need to protect instead of persecute Asian Americans. Also, he refers to Covid-19 as the “Virus” and no longer the “Chinese Virus.” However, other Republicans in Congress have continued to refer to Covid-19 as “the Chinese flu,” the “Chinese coronavirus,” and “the Wuhan coronavirus” (Scott, 2020).

### ***Impacts on Asians & Asian Americans***

President Trump’s use of the “Chinese virus” has had a direct impact on the number of discrimination cases reported by members of the Asian community (Kim, 2020). Asians and Asian Americans have experienced the brunt of racist bullying during this pandemic, and have been targeted on trains, in groceries stores, and in schools (Escobar, 2020). Many of the racist slurs began in December when the virus first hit China; however, the verbal attacks have increasingly worsened since Covid-19 migrated to the U.S. (Kim, 2020). While on a train, one San Franciscan recalled a white woman covering her nose and mouth, claiming that she “just didn’t want to get sick” (Escobar, 2020). Another commuter recalled two separate instances where fellow passengers told her to “Go back to China” (Escobar, 2020). One middle schooler

said that people at school have been calling her “corona” and asking if she eats dogs. An elementary school student said that a classmate came up to him and said, “You’re Chinese, so you must have the coronavirus” (Escobar, 2020). This same type of harassment is present in other countries as well. In Australia, some parents are refusing to let their children be treated by Asian doctors. In Canada, 10,000 Toronto residents signed a petition for their local school district to track and isolate Chinese-Canadian students who have recently traveled to China.

Xenophobia has always existed under the surface, but due to Covid-19 racist acts against Asians and Asian Americans are occurring without consequence. This treatment derives from the way people of color are treated in the United States as unequal to white Americans. Implicit messages that depict whiteness as superior continue to circulate through our media and regard people of color as less than and insignificant. Accordingly, demanding proper representation in all forms of media is crucial in changing the ways people of color are treated in society.

This section discussed how Hollywood has functioned as the gatekeepers of film media within the United States and around the globe. The Academy has historically failed to recognize nonwhite creators, and thus has participated in the marginalization of people of color. Despite Hollywood’s Eurocentric preferences, films like *BP* and *CRA* featuring casts of color have performed well in the box office. The sheer success of these films validates the need for Hollywood to create more quality stories that represent minorities. Overall, movies like *BP* and *CRA* should not be merely a trend. In order to make long term changes in society, the voices of people of color deserve to be heard. Actor Lupita Nyong’o from *BP* further stresses the importance of permanence for diversity in Hollywood and pledges to fight for inclusion for all underrepresented groups until it becomes the norm (The Hollywood Reporter, 2019). And if

Hollywood does not create films with people of color in mind, director Ava DuVernay urges us to create our own, stating “I work in an industry that really has no regard for my voice and the voice of people like me and so, what do I do? Keep knocking on that door or build your own house?” (Ramos, 2018). Currently, writers and producers are preparing for a sequel to both *BP* and *CRA* and are welcoming the release of more films that feature stories about people of color in the future.

### Chapter 3: Method

Critical rhetoric is a praxis and theory that examines how power functions in society and is normalized within communities (Herbig & Hess, 2012). It aims to demystify the integration of power and knowledge production by reconsidering the nature of doxa and questioning the taken-for-granted world (Brower, 2016; McKerrow, 1989; Ono & Sloop, 1995). More importantly, it seeks to uncover effaced identities concerning race, gender, class, and more (Brower, 2016; Wanzer-Serrano, 2019). I chose to examine *BP* and *CRA* using the method of critical rhetoric as these films provide a voice for communities of color that have been marginalized due to colonization and persistent structural racism. This method section discusses the principles of critical rhetoric, reviews its roles in rhetorical studies, explores a few types of critical rhetoric, and explains how it is used to analyze *BP* and *CRA*.

Power is integral to social relations and it can implicate one's freedom and domination (Brower, 2016). Power is viewed in terms of a ruling class that is maintained through discursive practices and determines who can and cannot speak (McKerrow, 1989). The ruling class adheres to a set of acceptable rituals and roles that create ingroups and outgroups. Individuals who behave outside of their prescribed roles are generally sanctioned. The ruling class does not need to overtly censor opposing ideas because individuals in the dominated groups hegemonically adhere to their positions within society. As a result, the dominated often participate in their own domination. Critical rhetoric centralizes discourse by influencing knowledge production through certain ideologies and social structures (Herbig & Hess, 2012; McKerrow, 1989). Over time, however, the emphasis on discourse has shifted from whether an idea is true or false to how discourse legitimates the interests of the dominant class (McKerrow, 1989). Discourse is directed

to people based on their social class; it reflects the will of the dominant class and the will of the subordinate class. For example, to achieve participation from the subordinate class, the dominant class employs language such as “we” to foster a false sense of collectivity.

Critical rhetoric breaks down into smaller categories that include vernacular discourse and public rhetoric. Critiquing vernacular discourse helps rhetoricians understand how communities are constructed and function. In studying the maintenance of power, Ono and Sloop (1995) describe vernacular discourse as every day speech that resonates within local communities, manifesting itself through artforms that are unique to specific communities, such as music, dance, visual art, and architecture. Critics of vernacular rhetoric examine historically oppressed communities by looking through local newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets, television, radio, and independent films. Through vernacular rhetoric, critics are pushed to continuously question the taken-for-granted world (Ono & Sloop, 1995).

Rhetoric constitutes doxastic rather than epistemic knowledge (McKerrow, 1989). Instead of focusing on what is simply true or false, a doxastic view of rhetoric allows scholars to shift their attention to symbols that possess power. While there may be multiple interpretations of the same subject being studied, it begs critics to question what symbols do in society rather than what they are. Considering the way power functions in society, critical rhetoric reveals inclusions and exclusions (Pham, 2019). Rhetorically speaking, the dominant class controls the distribution of symbols and decides who is permitted to speak (McKerrow, 1989). Therefore, the marginalized groups with less control must communicate through alternate channels such as public rhetoric, which prompts individuals to speak to the masses about their experiences concerning a particular event (Herbig & Hess, 2012; McKerrow, 1989).

## **The Roles of Critical Rhetoric**

McKerrow (1989) describes critique as a performance in which the rhetorician engages in a particular set of practices. To begin, rhetorical scholars must search for what is absent, as that is just as important as what is present (McKerrow, 1989). For example, when analyzing a photograph, the scholar must examine what is obvious in the picture in addition to elements that are not so obvious. Ono and Sloop (1995) explain that critical rhetoricians must focus on the ways in which subjects form particular discourses. In doing so, critics must locate, catalogue, and construct a critical framework from their findings. Following, there must be an additional reflection on the subjects and findings of the study. Critical rhetoric prompts scholars to ask questions like, “Why are these voices absent?” and “What does their absence mean to the production of knowledge in rhetorical studies?” (Asante, 2019, p. 487). By doing so, scholars can ensure that they are not reproducing dominant ways of thinking and acting.

Critical rhetoric decenters Western knowledge. Asante (2019) writes that many rhetoric courses were initially framed by Western thinkers such as Aristotle, Cicero, Kenneth Burke, Lloyd Bitzer, Wayne Booth and others. This organization of knowledge in the West has led people to understand knowledge as belonging to a particular geographical space, and in turn, influenced how knowledge outside of that space is discredited. Asante (2019) claims that notions of reason are reserved by Western heteronormative men, and that their positionality and perspective cannot address the experiences of feminist, Queer, Trans\*, Chicano, Latinx, Third World, Indigenous, and black rhetorical scholars. Therefore, critical rhetoric allows marginalized people to speak on their experiences.



Critical rhetoric reveals the uninterrogated desire for whiteness in society. Nonwhite scholars are underrepresented due to citational practices and a lack of scholarly networks (Asante, 2019). Even when scholars of color are able to publish their work, they are grossly under-cited. This is demonstrated through white fragility, the desire to protect and reinstate whiteness, within academia (Pham, 2019). Citational practices are largely racialized and gendered by their tendency to disavow people of color, queer people, and knowledges of the Global South (Asante, 2019). Thus, Asante (2019) calls for rhetorical scholars to become more mindful of who we decide to cite, as well as what we assign as class readings.

### **Types of Critical Rhetoric**

Rand (2013) highlights how communication studies and rhetorical theory exist comfortably within the realm of normativity. Rhetorical criticism often denies its heteronormative foundations by trying to appear somewhat noncontroversial and nonpolitical. As a result, Rand (2013) and Brummett (2000) call for the development of alternative critical frameworks that address communities that have historically been discounted within the dominant frame. This juncture within communication studies prevents scholars from proceeding business as usual. In doing so, Flores (2016) argues that rhetorical critics must become aware of race in their own critical behaviors. Some examples of critical rhetoric include racial rhetorical criticism, indigeneity as analytic, and queer rhetorical studies.

Critical rhetoric has been described as the study of race and marginalization; therefore, Flores (2016) introduces the method of racial rhetorical criticism. As a derivative of critical rhetoric, racial rhetorical criticism reflects on and engages with the “persistence of racial oppression, logics, voices, and bodies and that theorizes the very production of race as

rhetorical” (Flores, 2016, p. 5). Simply put, racial rhetorical scholars think at the intersection of race to understand how it is sustained through discourse (Pham, 2019). Complying with the notion that rhetoric, at its core, is also the study of race, rhetorical critics strive to expand the study of racial rhetorical criticism (Flores, 2016). However, it is necessary to comprehend the history of race and racism to gain a better understanding as to why it is rhetorical. The history of rhetoric is quite exclusive to dominant histories as it prioritizes writing from Western perspectives (Na’puti, 2019). Therefore, Asante (2019) proposes that scholars of color, who engage in delinking from the Western-centered lens, be included.

Indigeneity as analytic is another form of critical rhetoric that centers indigenous knowledge and addresses the discourse of indigeneity as a form of ancestry instead of acknowledging blood quantum, race, ethnicity, and nationality (Na’puti, 2019). Indigeneity as analytic challenges erasure due to colonization while still focusing on indigenous epistemologies. It serves to decolonize the practice of white supremacy while directly challenging colonial histories. Na’puti (2019) claims that indigeneity is different from race. For example, she opens her essay by explaining how she is Chamoru, a group of indigenous people from the island of Guam who hold a responsibility to protect their land, ocean, and people. Her Chamoru membership depends on her connection to her land and people and not necessarily on matrilineal/patrilineal bloodlines. Lastly, queer rhetorical studies was created to recover muted voices within the queer community. Queer critical rhetoric begs scholars to “(re)turn to the archive” and develop new materials to use as sources (Rand, 2013, p. 535). Not only does queer rhetoric decenter cis-heteronormativity in research, but it also encourages inclusivity in rhetorical studies at large.

### ***#RhetoricSoWhite & #CommunicationSoWhite***

Communication scholars have performed rhetorical critiques on the field of communication and rhetoric itself through #RhetoricSoWhite and #CommunicationSoWhite. Pham (2019) states that #RhetoricSoWhite was coined on Twitter by Darrel Wanzer-Serrano to ignite conversations about persistent whiteness ideologies within the field of communication; this term prompts scholars to decolonize rhetorical studies by understanding how power is articulated and used to create inclusions and exclusions. Several rhetoric scholars contributed their input on exclusions within the field through the *Journal of Communication*'s forum called #CommunicationSoWhite (Wanzer-Serrano, 2019). Scholars argue that knowledge production was created to reinforce the unexamined position of whiteness through certain publication and citational practices. Adding to this, the academy remains largely white and acts to maintain that whiteness. In the past, the structure has privileged white voices and white scholarship, specifically scholarship by cis-gendered, able-bodied white men (Wanzer-Serrano, 2019).

### ***Analysis of BP & CRA Using Critical Rhetoric***

Rhetorical studies has a race problem due to its focus on exclusionary politics and its exclusions of scholars of color. While the demand for critical rhetoric is valid, Helene Shugart (as cited in Wanzer-Serrano, 2019) believes that one must conform to scholarly traditions in order for their work to be recognized as legitimate. Therefore, I do just that in examining the subjects of my case study. To analyze my subjects, I have watched *BP* and *CRA* multiple times, taking hand-written notes each time. Afterwards, I scanned through my notes several times looking for recurring themes, specifically honing in on evidence of race and class. For my analysis, I discover why these films are such popular cultural products in the United States, as

well as how its wide appeal begs for rhetorical critique. Next, I utilize critical rhetoric to address taken-for-granted ideas that continue to circulate through Hollywood films. Following, I decenter Western epistemic thinking and highlight instances of hegemonic whiteness. Lastly, I show how these films seek to include the voices of marginalized identities into mainstream film media.

This section discussed the principles of critical rhetoric, focusing on how societies organize in relation to power. In addition, it reviewed the roles of critical rhetoric, which are to engage in the taken-for-granted world, decenter Western knowledge, and reveal whiteness embedded in media. Afterwards, this section explained three types of critical rhetoric that include racial rhetorical criticism, indigeneity as analytic, and queer rhetorical studies. Finally, this chapter communicates how critical rhetoric aids in the analysis of *BP* and *CRA*.

## Chapter 4: Literature Review

In order to examine *Black Panther (BP)* and *Crazy Rich Asians (CRA)*, this thesis project employs three theoretical lenses that include Critical Race Theory (CRT), postcolonialism, and Afrofuturism. These theories are particularly useful in explaining how race is constructed, deconstructed, and reimaged in society, and its application reveals the rhetorical implications of race and power in *BP* and *CRA*. The first section of this literature review examines how CRT addresses racism's persistence in the U.S. legal system. Next, Postcolonialism studies the influence of colonization through everyday taken-for-granted activities. In this thesis, I specifically bring attention to the lingering existence of colonial dominance that manifests itself through American media (e.g. Hollywood). Finally, Afrofuturism imagines a world where people of color can exist without being limited by a history (and present) of oppression.

### Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state that racism is a foundation of the legal system and its influence on society is systemic and deeply rooted in U.S. history. Luminaries of CRT, Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas (1995) argue that racism has been allowed to persist through social practices, thus becoming normalized and natural. In addition to making racism ordinary, it has established a psychological and internal preference for whiteness in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Through scholarship, critical race theorists have worked to uncover the ways in which race has been used to systematically privilege whiteness in all elements of society. This section reviews the present literature on CRT from its foundations in critical legal scholarships to its extension into communication and whiteness studies.

In comprehending CRT, it is first crucial to understand race. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) describe race as a social construction. Society assigns constructed races to pseudo-permanent characteristics and then perpetuates that shared knowledge. The manner in which categories and subgroups are framed indicate who has power within society. Further, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state that “society invents, manipulates, and retires when convenient” (p. 7). CRT was built to interrogate the notion of race as a social construction. For one, it contends that there is no objective truth, since “truth” is also a social construct created to suit dominant groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Calmore (1992) asserts that CRT recenters interests and people from the margins by establishing a set of basic tenets that undermine the truths that society has constructed. For example, American culture offers a set of truths about opportunity and achievement, perpetuating the belief that everyone has access to the same tools. However, if an African American person does not live up to that standard, they are held liable for their failure. Instead of blaming systemic racism as the culprit, Africans Americans are unfairly viewed as inherently inferior to whites (Calmore, 1992).

### ***History of CRT***

During the 1970s, a group of scholars developed CRT to understand the relationship between race and power. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, these students sought to discover how everyday life was impacted by race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In addition, CRT combines civil rights scholarship with critiques of left legal scholarship, also known as Critical Legal Studies (CLS), which acknowledges how institutions have the power to shape society. As a result, CLS scholars aimed to uncover that power in law school institutions (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). Prior to this shift in attention, law schools discussed people

of color in regard to poverty law, welfare law, criminal law, and immigration law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

There were two events that prompted CRT as a movement: the Harvard student protests in 1981 and the Critical Legal Studies National Conference in 1987 (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). In 1971, Derrick Bell became the first tenured African American professor at Harvard Law School and created a curriculum that focused on law through a race-conscious lens. Bell later left Harvard to accept a position as the dean of the University of Oregon Law School in 1980, making him one of the first African Americans to have a leadership position at a mainstream university. Upon his exit, students demanded that Harvard replace Bell with another professor of color who would teach constitutional law from a minority perspective. However, the university claimed that “there were no qualified black scholars who merited Harvard’s interest” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. xx). This event sparked the creation of alternative courses throughout law schools all over the country that focused on the intersection of race and law. Dissatisfied with the current system, many scholars of color came together to adopt a more critical view of race that contested dominant legal discourse and advanced mainstream discourse through CRT. Since then, communication studies has adopted and expanded CRT to study the representations of other marginalized identities in media.

### ***Expansions of CRT***

As advancements in communication theory seek to challenge Eurocentric ideas by incorporating multicultural scholarship and non-Western thinking (Miike, 2007), critics have extended CRT to develop alternative methods such as storytelling and multiple sub-criticisms that include “QueerCrit,” “LatCrit,” “Critical Race Feminism,” “TribalCrit,” and “AsianCrit”

(Cristobal, 2018, p. 33; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). QueerCrits focus on the relationship between norms and attitudes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). LatCrits examine immigration issues, language rights, bilingual schooling, and Latin American refugees. TribalCrits spotlight self-determination, colonization, and identity. AsianCrits interrogate the model minority myth, which assumes that Asians are always industrious, high achieving, and highly educated (Chang, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). They also bring attention to the diversity of Asian cultures, issues of labor and classism, and immigration to the United States (Chang, 2013). AsianCrits center Asiatic epistemologies to depict a more comprehensive picture of Asian cultures and experiences (Miike, 2007). With that, they also contribute indigenous theories, Asian languages, religious-philosophical traditions, and historical experiences to communication theory. From this list, I incorporate both traditional CRT and AsianCrit principles to analyze *BP* and *CRA*.

### **Storytelling.**

Prior to the development of CRT, there was no language to discuss race and racism, making it harder for people of color to articulate their experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Therefore, CRT critics use stories to better illustrate experiences of racial discrimination. Narratives give marginalized groups a voice by legitimizing their erased discourses and their contributions to society (Chang, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Storytelling also reduces alienation and offers ways for majority groups to try to understand others' experiences. However, storytelling has been criticized for multiple reasons. First, stories can diverge depending on who tells them; for example, dominant groups may have a different story about American history and may sanitize the realities of racism in the process. Second, stories may not always represent minority experiences, leading some people to view them as a ploy to obtain



sympathy from an audience. Third, stories are open to interpretation, which may make it difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue about the issues at hand (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

### **Whiteness.**

A major expansion of CRT is the study of whiteness. CRT critics began studying whiteness as a race and a culture to specifically examine the privileges that come along with white membership. In order to subordinate certain groups ideologically, whites created racialized categories to distinguish who could receive rights and who could not under the U.S. legal system. Harris (1993) contends that the law has always benefited white citizens by protecting whiteness. Based on exclusions and subjugations, whiteness became a unifying characteristic that barred nonwhite individuals from sharing any benefits with whites. Whiteness functions as the normative standard by which language and culture revolves around (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Harris, 1993).

Although race is “an ideological proposition imposed through subordination,” the law constructed whiteness to appear fundamental to nature (Harris, 1993, p. 1730; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). However, whiteness is not found in nature, but is a political classification (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Categorizing whiteness as natural instead of cultural embeds power within that category. To further support this subjugation, the law legitimized pseudosciences to disqualify one from whiteness if he/she contains any other bloodlines.

### **White Privilege.**

Whiteness became the combination of race plus privilege (Harris, 1993). White privilege is the social advantages, benefits, and courtesies received from being white (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In exploring the relationship between race and property, Harris (1993) coins the

term *whiteness as property*, which explains whiteness as a commodity used to purchase a better life (education, jobs, and housing) through systematic means (Harris, 1993). For example, in the 1700s and early 1800s, only white men were citizens; therefore, only white men had the privilege to own property and weapons, assemble publicly, and become educated (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Harris, 1993). Nonwhites, on the other hand, were not permitted to have any of those same privileges and were exploited as the property. During slavery, enslaved Africans were owned as property and exploited to fulfill white interests “legally.” They could be “transferred, assigned, inherited, or posted as collateral” (Harris, 1993, p. 1720). In addition, whites “legally” exterminated Native American people and assumed ownership over their land (Harris, 1993). These examples further reinforce how American law was created and maintained to protect whiteness.

### ***Marked & (Un)marked Social Positions.***

Since racism is systemic and deeply ingrained in American society, it is difficult for scholars to address how whiteness and white privilege is promoted and maintained (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Hall (1985) claims that whiteness only appears through subtraction and takes shape in relation to marked others. Warren and Twine (1997) and Nakayama and Krizek (1995) echo Hall’s assertion as it applies to North American whites who consider whiteness as an unmarked, cultureless position. One way of concealing whiteness and white privilege is through the use of color-blindness (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. xv). Color-blindness is the idea that people judge minorities through meritocracy, rather than the color of their skin. Chao, Wei, Good, and Flores (2011) affirm that color-blindness denies that race and racism hold social significance and is a biased framework that maintains the status quo and minimizes racial

inequalities in the U.S. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) believe that color-blindness does not allow critics to address any serious issues, but only the most egregious and outrageous ones.

Color-blindness is a metaphorical barrier that prevents one from interrogating racist systems.

Another way whiteness is concealed is through the assertion of postracial societies. Watts (2017) performed a case study on a company called Zombie Industries to analyze postracial fantasies found in the Zombie trope. Zombie Industries creates 3D target mannequins that intensify the enjoyment of the shooter by enabling the target to bleed upon impact. Zombie Industries has been criticized for depicting violence against women in the past; however, it is now being questioned for its “Rocky” Zombie that bears the image of former President Barack Obama (Watts, 2017, p. 317). The company denies all allegations that their product is based on the likeness of Barack Obama and claims that any resemblance is pure coincidence. In preparing its customers for the Zombie Apocalypse, it believes that the Zombie virus can affect everyone regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, and religion. Therefore, Zombie Industries maintains that its products do not discriminate and that the purposeful exclusion of African American Zombies would be “just plain racist” (Watts, 2017, p. 326).

Watts (2017) argues that Zombie Industries adopted a postracial form of discrimination. After the election of President Barack Obama some people believe that the U.S. became a postracial society, which is the idea that racism is a thing of the past. The election of a black president leads some Americans to assume that the U.S. now holds compassion and empathy toward people of all races. However, Watts (2017) asserts that the “Zombie Obama” represents a “semblance of control through violence” and “allows for the distance needed for the postracial fantasy to be intact” (p. 328). Shooting the Zombie Obama shifts racial violence from the black

body and onto an object that represents black people. As a result, the postracial trope masks the horrific history of racism in the United States.

*Performing Whiteness.*

Whiteness is constituted through discursive practices that reproduce racial identifications through social interaction (Warren, 2001). Warren (2001) relates the maintenance of one's racial identity to a performance, "a repetition of acts that strategically obscures its own production, thus appearing as something we are rather than as something we do" (p. 200). Nakayama and Krizek (1995) add that the white racial identity is also constituted through the rhetoric of whiteness; concealed through rhetorical discourses, whiteness wields power from an uninterrogated, "unarticulated position" and continues to negotiate and reinforce white dominance in the U.S. (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 291).

Whiteness is malleable and constantly in flux. In the late 1800s through the early 1900s, Irish and Italian immigrants were considered nonwhite compared to the English, Scottish, and Germans; however, the Irish and Italians gained membership to the white racial category over time through assimilation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Warren & Twine, 1997). Eventually, other ethnic groups, such as Chinese and Latino immigrants, also made their way into the white racial category. Warren and Twine (1997) claim that these ethnic groups achieved whiteness by conforming to white standards and distancing themselves from blackness. Nonwhite, but not quite black, individuals imitated the white community by reproducing racist sentiments against black people. For example, although many Chinese Americans from Mississippi lived in poorer communities alongside blacks, they distanced themselves from their neighbors in order to attain full rights as white Americans. By the 1960s, Chinese Americans in Mississippi were able to

attend white schools, join white churches, identify as white on their driver's licenses, and marry white women (Warren & Twine, 1997). This demonstrates how performance has the potential to trump biological racial categories and grant nonwhites entrance into the ever-changing bounds of whiteness.

### **Intersectionality.**

Dixson (2018) declares intersectionality as the examination of how “race, class, gender, sexual identity, marital status, citizenship status and other social identities often serve as points of marginality” (pp. 233-234). Intersectionality further describes individuals who face discrimination through the occupation of more than one identity (Chang, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Since social groups tend to focus on one identity at a time, the concerns of individuals at the intersection are never addressed. Legally speaking, Crenshaw (1991) explains how discrimination-based cases risk dismissal if they deviate too far from the norm. For example, an African American woman can identify with being black and being a woman. If one filed a case based on being discriminated against as an African American woman in the workplace, the court could only address one identity at a time. If the court could not find evidence of gender-based mistreatment across the board, the case could be dropped. Additionally, if the court could not find evidence of race-based mistreatment in the workplace, the case could also be dropped. Carbado (2013) explains that the courts viewed black women's experiences as being the same as white women in terms of sex and the same as black men in terms of race. Thus, the courts believed that there was no need to recognize black women as a distinct group in antidiscrimination law.

Although identity politics can be beneficial to women, they can also tend to ignore intragroup differences (Crenshaw, 1991). Therefore, Wingfield and Taylor (2016) claim that racial minorities develop counterframes to challenge the white racial frame. The 'white racial frame' shapes the worldview and perspective of systemic racism. It characterizes wealth disparity by claiming black inferiority, rather than pointing to structural reasons. Contrarily, intersectional counterframes examine how race is related to gender and class, and thus challenge behaviors guided by racial hierarchies. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter movement was inspired by Crenshaw's view of intersectionality and aligns with CRT (Dixson, 2018). It serves as an intersectional counterframe to create social change for not only black people, but for all minority identities.

### *Criticisms of CRT*

Scholars have criticized CRT on a number of issues since its expansion. First, critics claim that CRT has divested from its original goal, which was to fight inequality for poor minorities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Instead, critics argue that CRT focuses too much on identity and not enough on social injustice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson, 2018). Second, Delgado (1992) conveys that scholarship on racism in American law was exclusively composed by white men, thus he accordingly encourages more minority scholars to write about race. Lastly, Paradise (2014) criticizes CRT for failing to acknowledge Christianity's role in informing CLS. He points out how the Southern Christian churches specifically played a large role in pushing the Civil Rights Movement forward, yet the founders of CRT chose to omit Christianity in the development of their theory.

**Differential Racialization.**

Although CRT promotes equity for marginalized people, it does not guarantee progress without retaliation from groups in power. CRT scholars are aware of “differential racialization,” which is when a dominant group realizes the need for a minority group to fulfill the labor market (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 8). Differential racialization holds that each group has been racialized and exploited by majority groups throughout particular moments in history. Any gains by communities of color reflect white self-interests. For example, advances in civil rights coincided with whites who were concerned about the present economic conditions. After African Americans fought along the front lines of the Korean War and World War II, whites knew that blacks would not return to the U.S. to work menial jobs. As a result, blacks were given more job opportunities. In another example, during the school desegregation cases, the Justice Department and the NAACP found memos containing comments about how desegregation would make the U.S. look better to countries of the Global South.

When one minority group gains ground, another group tends to lose ground. After slavery was disbanded and African Americans gained freedom, Mexican territories were being pushed back farther, and Congress passed the Indian Appropriations Act of 1871, the Dawes Act, and the Chinese Exclusion Act, all of which jeopardized the freedoms of other minority groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Sometimes after a group of people make progress in society and the novelty dissipates, the helpers no longer devote attention to the cause. At other times, groups receive backlash after progress is made. For example, once Barack Obama became president, there was an awakening of white nationalists who tried to reverse racial progress. Therefore, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) contend that racial progress must be timed strategically, stating

that “too slow would make minorities impatient and risk destabilization; too fast could jeopardize important material and psychic benefits for elite groups” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 31).

In this section of the literature review, I discussed the history of CRT from its formation in legal studies to its expansion as a communication theory and a cornerstone of whiteness studies. Using whiteness principles, CRT investigates the white racial identity as an unmarked position and contends that whiteness is both reproduced and concealed through rhetorical discourse. Following, I explained the concept of intersectionality and revealed a few criticisms of CRT. Based on CRT’s value for critical approaches to taken-for-granted phenomenon, I chose to utilize it as a theoretical lens to study *BP* and *CRA*. Later in this paper, I rely on many of its original tenets and incorporate some of its expansions (AsiaCrit and whiteness studies) for my analysis. Lastly, I discuss in further detail how whiteness is constructed and maintained in the absence of white people by examining which identities become marked and (un)marked in homogenous societies.

### **Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonialism theorizes the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized (Fanon, 1963). To much contestation, postcolonialism does not denote post-independence or the idea that colonialism has ended. Instead, postcolonialism began at the same time of the first colonial contact (Martínes-San Miguel, 2009). This theory examines the overall effects of colonization and focuses on how knowledge production is Western-oriented (Shome, 2016; Spivak, 2010). While Western history neglects any other histories outside of Europe and North America (Canada and the United States), postcolonialism attempts to remedy displaced peoples



of the Global South by gathering pieces of erased histories (Martínes-San Miguel, 2009; Shome, 2016). Postcolonial studies has typically been associated with English and comparative literature; however, it has inspired interdisciplinary areas of research such as race and gender studies and can be used to deconstruct Western hegemonic ideologies found in media.

This section of the literature review discusses postcolonial theory as a foundation in understanding the construction of race and the subordination of the Global South. Dados and Connell (2012) state that the ‘Global South’ is a term used to describe low-income regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania that are often marginalized politically and culturally. Next, the literature explains how the West created its own knowledge systems to dominate Eastern societies. Following, this section reviews the concept of subalternity. Lastly, it examines how colonizers and colonized subjects used media as a tool.

Postcolonial scholars reference several terms to portray people of the East and the West. These terms include subaltern, colonizer and colonized, Orientalism, and Orient and Orientalist. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Spivak (2010) explores how postcolonialism can be used to understand colonized people, in which she refers to as the subaltern. Fanon’s (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth* focuses heavily on the relationship between the colonizer (Europeans who exploited non-Western people and their lands) and the colonized (victims of the West’s exploitation). He reviews the inner thoughts and behaviors of both individuals and provides the reader with a better understanding of the dynamics of colonialism and postcolonialism. Said (1978) introduces the term ‘Orientalism’ to describe the distorted lens that the West uses to examine the unfamiliar and strange (Smith, Talrej, & Jhally, 1998). Orientalism asks why people of the West have preconceived notions about people from the Global South. Said (1978) poses

the question of how we (as the West) come to understand strangers simply by the color of their skin. In doing so, he describes two relational positions, the Orient (the East) and the Occident (the West).

### ***Origins of Postcolonialism***

Postcolonialism began at the moment colonization began. Colonizers constructed an imaginary border between themselves and the people they colonized. In order to discursively mark the colonized subject as inferior, they meticulously planned an unassailable system to control every aspect of social, political, and economic life for both the colonizer and the colonized (Fanon, 1963). In supporting the progression of colonizers' lives, this system has prevented colonized people from achievement and independence. Lastly, this system is enforced through surveillance by the police and the military who use weapons to violently terrorize the colonized. As an active force in this scheme, Fanon (1963) claims that the government does nothing to alleviate this pressure, but instead adds to it.

In addition to systems and surveillance, colonizers used religion, historically Christianity, to restrain the colonized. However, Fanon (1963) states that colonizers do “not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor” (p. 14). In pushing the colonized to declare white values as supreme, values of the colonized are made to appear inferior and irrelevant. When the colonized become angry enough to consider decolonization, they are told by the colonizer to be reasonable and consider their values, which have essentially become the values of the colonizer. Knowing that the process to decolonize is violent, bloody, and destructive, the colonizer gathers the colonized bourgeoisie, whose ambiguous allegiances provide a buffer between the colonizer and the colonized, to

promote nonviolence as a way to protect themselves and their interests (Fanon, 1963). In connection with Fanon's views on nonviolence, Stokely Carmichael states,

The only time I hear people talk about nonviolence is when black people move to defend themselves against white people. Black people cut themselves every night in the ghetto - don't nobody talk about nonviolence. Lyndon Baines Johnson is busy bombing the hell out of Vietnam - don't nobody talk about nonviolence. White people beat up black people every day - don't nobody talk about nonviolence. But as soon as black people start to move, the double standard comes into being. (Gaiter, 2018, p. 301)

This idea demonstrates the lack of concern colonizers have for the well-being of the colonized. They disregard the violence that occurs in marginalized communities until it begins to impact them directly. It disturbs their ability to ignore others until they have no other choice but to protect their interests and maintain the unequal distribution of power that has become the status quo.

### ***Knowledge Production***

Western theorists use research and knowledge to justify the conquest and enslavement of others. Spivak (2010) criticizes Western academic work that seeks to investigate other cultures through seemingly universal frameworks. She contends that scholars such as Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida commit epistemic violence due to their white European epistemologies and Eurocentric thinking. Said echoes Spivak by asserting that the Orientalists observed and recorded everything about the people they conquered in order to successfully colonize them in large groups (Smith, Talrej, & Jhally, 1998). For example, during imperialism Napoleon Bonaparte led

the first modern invasion of the Middle East and brought soldiers and scientists to scientifically survey Egypt for the purposes of developing European knowledge (Smith, Talrej, & Jhally, 1998). Once constructing their knowledge about the Orient, they presented the information as an objective truth through texts. Said (1978) believes that textual knowledge holds power because it establishes discourse. Since texts reinforce the Orient's position in society, Said returns to texts to understand how Orientalism was constructed.

Spivak (2010) specifically discusses several issues that arise when Western ethnographers travel to the East. First, they tend to produce misleading scholarship that is based on assumptions of the subjects that they study. Their work relies on words but not real experiences because it is difficult to give voice to groups of people without sufficient experience. As a result, their findings present only a fraction of the total experience. Second, it is impossible for the West to discuss the non-West without employing colonial discourses. In fact, Orientalists used their own languages to describe cultures in the East, which positioned them as inferior (Smith, Talrej, & Jhally, 1998). Third, Western scholars congratulate themselves for helping the Other and define the subaltern as merely helpless victims. Stripping the subaltern of their agency reinforces the factoid that Western methods are superior to non-Western knowledges (Spivak, 2010). Spivak (2010) argues that Eurocentric scholarship is always colonial in the way that it distances the researcher from the subject and supports Western economic interests. Like any other commodity, knowledge expresses the interests of its producers, so the knowledge that the West constructs is built to suit their own agendas.

Orientalism was constructed to specifically serve French and British imperial agendas (Said, 1978). Orientalism represents a system of knowledge about nations of the Global South

that developed from the 18th century to the 20th (Said, 1978). Shifting from religious to secular scholarship in the 18th century, Orientalists began to classify humans and nature into categories to dehumanize them and mark them inferior, which ultimately made it easier to control them (Said, 1978). By the 20th century, Orientalists began to construct imaginative geographies that separated the East from the West. This artificial boundary served to separate and exert power over the Orient, making the West appear more knowledgeable than the East (Said, 1978). Orientalists believed that the Orient needed to be enlightened and dominated; their goal was to speak for them (Said, 1978). By the end of WWII, the United States replaced Britain and France as the primary Orientalist. American occupation in the Middle East was more indirect but sought to manipulate the Orient (non-Western nations) through public policy.

### ***Subalternity***

The subaltern describes individuals whose groups exist outside of the West geographically, socially, and politically. To answer the question, “Can the subaltern speak?” Spivak (2010) declares that they cannot; the subaltern cannot represent itself and must be spoken for. She adds that it is impossible to recover the voice of the subaltern because Western academic fields cannot relate to the Other when using its own paradigms.

Spivak also includes the intersection of race and gender as components of postcolonial subalternity. For example, the voices of Indian women were muted during the sati debates, thus Spivak considered them the subaltern. In 1829, the British abolished sati, a Hindu practice where widows sacrificed themselves on their husband’s pyre. Britain’s act to outlaw the practice of sati prompted Spivak’s highly contested and often misinterpreted quote, “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 2010, p. 12). This idea highlights how European colonizers

considered it their divine mission to rescue the subaltern from its own culture and people. The implications of the sati ban resulted in some lives being saved granting Indian women free choice, but more importantly, it secured Britain's power over India. It made British practices appear civilized while Indian traditions were considered barbaric (Spivak, 2010). This act reduced Hindu culture as illegitimate compared to the British way of life.

By offering the idea of publics and counterpublics, Warner (2008) suggests that the subaltern is not completely powerless. The public includes individuals within a particular field of question. Since counterpublics characterize the outgroup, they represent the subaltern. Aware of their socially subordinated status, counterpublics circulate their own discourses that directly oppose dominant publics. Warner (2008) describes them as "parallel discursive arenas" due to their contending identifications (Warner, 2008, p. 85). Through the organization of counterpublics, the subaltern is empowered to oppose colonial forces.

### ***Media As Postcolonial Tools***

Counterpublics use media to mobilize the colonized in opposing colonial dominance. Postcolonial scholars have historically studied the theory as it relates to traditional media, but newer scholarship examines the ways in which colonization still persists through newer media like film. Postcolonialism mixes the traditional aspects with modernity in everything from architecture to technology and to media. Several assumptions influence our understanding of media as it relates to postcolonial societies. One is that developed media systems are secularized and lead to more democratic cultures. Western cultures equate speed to modernity; speed is associated with cleanliness, purity, and order, while slowness is equated to dirtiness, laziness, and chaos (Shome, 2016). The second assumption is that theocratic, Islamic societies are not

modern due to their religiosity. While religion and secularism co-exist, they are problematically viewed as being strictly binary. However, more media and more technological advancement does not always result in democratic outcomes (Shome, 2016). A great example of this is how India characterizes the old and the new, all the while challenging popular views about media and communication (Shome, 2016).

In India's first Hindi science fiction (SF) musical, *Koi...Mil Gaya/ I Have Found Someone* (2003), the producers blend traditional elements with modern elements (Alessio & Langer, 2007). For instance, the main characters oppose Western conventions by incorporating the Hindu word 'OM' to communicate with extraterrestrials through an advanced computer. The producers purposefully omit any Islamic influence in the film to highlight Hindu dominance. This film presents India as being advanced, middle class and prosperous. The way it works against primitivist stereotypes challenges Hollywood's hegemonic blockbuster films and sharply positions it as a postcolonial text (Alessio & Langer, 2007). Similarly, *BP* performs this same feat by combining ancient ancestral traditions with the most advanced technology in the world. As a nation that has never been colonized, the film omits all obvious traces of colonial influence. For instance, instead of participating in religions spread by the West, Wakandans praise their own ancestors. Similar to *Koi...Mil Gaya*, *BP*'s omission of all other religions strengthens the presence of their ancestral worship.

### **Stereotypical Depictions in Media.**

Western media often broadcasts vast generalizations about marginalized groups in its news, television, and film by honing in on one negative aspect and then exasperating it to represent an entire group of people (Smith, Talrej, & Jhally, 1998). For example, American

media depicts the Middle East as an exotic land with monsters and secrets on one hand, and on the other hand, the U.S. paints them as irrational people and violent terrorists. Notably, habitual exposure to media messages can influence an individual's attitudes and beliefs about a particular subject. Over time, some American viewers have become suspicious of Arab people after consistently consuming media messages that portray them as violent. Adopting a narrow understanding about a wide group of people strips them of their individuality and humanity.

It appears that the United States uses its media to retaliate against the East if they fail to comply with American interests. For instance, the U.S. served as Israel's main ally during its struggle to become recognized as a Jewish state in an Islamic region. In fear that Islamic forces would threaten Israeli and American interests, American news media communicated Arab people and culture as a threat to American safety (Smith, Talrej, & Jhally, 1998). Another example describes the animosity toward Arab nations due to their control over the world's oil (Said, 1978). Lastly, those fears have worsened exponentially after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th. Since then, the U.S. has become increasingly hostile against Middle Eastern people through stereotypical characterizations in media.

### **The Role of Film Post Colonization.**

Postcolonial films provide people with the tools to fight back against oppressive forces driven by Eurocentric media. Prior to 1903, nonfiction films presented certain racial ideologies that had both direct and indirect correlations to colonialism (Amad, 2013). Using the invisible-eye model of spectatorship, the viewers, who were usually citizens of the West, surveilled the subject without consequence. This message reinforced the subject's subordinate position to viewers. Stripped of their agency, the subject was unable to speak back to the camera



or speak up for themselves. Newer films, however, employed the “visual riposte,” an ethical intent to have the subject return the gaze (Amad, 2013, p. 52). Returning the gaze achieves two things: 1) the film’s subject(s) looks back at the camera, camera operator, and film spectator, and 2) the subject refuses to be viewed through the West’s technological mediated structure of looking at cultural Others. As a result, returning the gaze is an act of defiance and rebuke; it unbalances the cinema’s dominant gaze and prevents it from controlling and orienting. The ability to return the gaze legitimizes the voices of people who were once disempowered by colonial forces, and more importantly, it invites them to use their own discourses to speak for themselves.

The visual riposte paved a way for Third Cinema to create films as social commentary. Third Cinema (Third World Cinema) began in Latin America in 1967 as a political cinematic movement that realistically portrays life in countries of the Global South in regard to poverty, identity, class, colonialism, and culture (LeBlanc, 2018). Third Cinema consists of three different phases that include assimilationist films (films modeled after Hollywood, e.g. Bollywood), local films about culture and history (films that romanticize the past and neglect social transformation), and combative films (production that is controlled by the masses and used as an ideological tool). Third Cinema values the viewer’s role and employs a range of techniques to fit the subject. Similarly, *BP* and *CRA* are not only sources of entertainment, but they also function as powerful media that comments on issues present in society. These two particular films artfully present stories about people of color that may not be rooted in reality but allow viewers to speculate a future where previously colonized groups can achieve anything.

Postcolonialism provides a better understanding of the legacy that colonization and imperialism have left on the world. This section of the literature review first discussed the origins of postcolonial theory and moved into how the West produced its own knowledge to subordinate the East. Next, the literature revealed the subaltern as a marginalized position in relation to the West. Despite its decentered position, the subaltern uses media as a tool to combat colonial dominance. Lastly, I reviewed the power film has in centering the stories of previously colonized people. Colonization and the process to decolonize has permanently altered the structure of society. The physical and mental subordination of human beings will take time to repair. Therefore, postcolonial theory intends to uncover and dismantle the systems that maintain lingering colonial powers. It also seeks to reconstruct what has been damaged through centuries of oppression against colonized people in hopes of advancing into a more equitable future.

### **Afrofuturism**

During the transatlantic slave trade, Europeans purchased people from Africa to ship them across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas and sell them into slavery. As a result, slavery led to the dispersion of African people, not just in the Americas but all across the globe. This dispersion stripped enslaved African people of their humanity, erased their identities, and broke their connection to each other and their land. As a way to sever unity between people of the African diaspora, Western colonizers destroyed traces of a shared past, sending modern-day scholars on a quest to recover the past and chart a future that is free of Western colonial influence (Barber, Anderson, Dery, & Thomas, 2018). Similar to CRT and postcolonial theory, Afrofuturism observes the relationship between race and power to dismantle structural racism

and white nationalism (van Veen & Anderson, 2018); however, it distinguishes itself by resisting power through speculative thinking (Barber et al., 2018).

As a theoretical lens, Afrofuturism is useful in examining *BP* and *CRA*. Both films contain stories of previously colonized groups that have since taken control over their present and future through monetary, military, and technological power that surpasses that of the Western world. This section of the literature review defines Afrofuturism, explains some of its key features and characteristics, and reviews its extension into other movements. While Afrofuturism mainly centers on Afrodiasporic experiences, this section extends its tenets to include all post colonized groups.

### ***Origins of Afrofuturism***

In 1993, Mark Dery coined the term ‘Afrofuturism’ in his book *Black to the Future* to address the gaps in speculative fiction and to offer a way to study African American concerns in the context of 20th century techno culture (Elia, 2014; Fitzpatrick, 2018; van Veen & Anderson, 2018). Dery was inspired by a number of thinkers and creators that provided language for discussing racial discrimination (Elia, 2014). He noticed that much of their work reflected W.E.B. DuBois’ notion of double consciousness, which allows black people to see themselves “through the revelation of the world... [it is] this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Avi Brooks, 2018, p. 102). To build upon Dery’s foundational work, Alondra Nelson created a listserv in 1998 where contributors expanded Afrofuturism to discuss the growing “digital divide” as a result of white futurism in Silicon Valley (van Veen & Anderson, 2018). In 2002, Nelson edited a volume about Afrofuturism based on the original listserv and helped to establish it as a field of study.

### ***Definition of Afrofuturism***

Afrofuturism is a movement that positions people of color within a future world void of marginalization (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Represented through various forms of media that include film, art, music, literature, games, and more, it explores the black identity and culture through the lens of science fiction. In examining the past and reimagining the future, Avi Brooks (2018) describes Afrofuturism as a tool for creating “positive associative pathways” for black people (p. 103). Since blackness has been associated with negativity in the West, Afrofuturism seeks to challenge previous portrayals of black people in all forms of media to provide a method for envisioning personal growth, social advancement, community, and peace (Khan, 2019). Instead of relying on the stagnated histories given to us from Western colonizers, Afrofuturist creators use Afrocentric epistemologies to center Afrodiasporic experiences. They also use Afrofuturism to critique images of black people and other marginalized groups in media (Avi Brooks, 2018; Elia, 2014). For example, scholars have access to ‘delinking,’ a practice that requires one to center indigenous knowledge in order to reinterpret the present and predict the future (Hanchey, 2019). Delinking objects Western universalism and prevents one from participating in colonial practices that undermine African epistemologies.

### **Counterhistories & Counterfutures.**

Afrofuturism’s blend of science fiction, mythology, and technology allows creators to alter the present and imagine a counterfuture that is based on the past (Avi Brooks, 2018; Barber et al., 2018; Elia, 2014; Hanchey, 2019). Similar to how societies use mythologies to sustain their cultural identities, Afrofuturists believe that groups also pass down counterhistories (speculations about the past) and counterfutures through generations. These myths attempt to

explain the unexplainable, maintaining stories about a culture's values and beliefs (Gaiter, 2018). Afrofuturism enables black people to strive for more and dream beyond what colonizers envisioned for them (Avi Brooks, 2018). Since Afrofuturism rejects the depictions of Africans as primitive, black people have the opportunity to articulate new forms of existence (Elia, 2014; Maynard, 2018). Overall, this form of agency over our own lives provides us with a means for healing, teaching, and mobilization.

Afrofuturist scholars relate the transatlantic slave trade to a man-made apocalypse that allowed for the reorganization of social, political, and economic life. As quoted in Maynard's (2018) essay, Toni Morrison believes slavery "broke the world in half" (p. 31). Colonizers dehumanized the colonized by constructing racial categories and erecting boundaries, all of which were based on pseudosciences and fictitious declarations. In retelling this narrative through the lens of science fiction, enslaved Africans are metaphorically compared to robots, aliens, and cyborgs that have been taken from other planets (Africa) to perform mechanical labor on earth (in the West) (Avi Brooks, 2018; Elia, 2014; Maynard, 2018). Robots, aliens, and cyborgs encapsulate the ideas promulgated about the nature of blackness during times of bondage. As these ideas perpetuated the myth that black people were subhuman or even non-human, it unduly justified our subjugation in society.

### ***Expansion of Afrofuturism***

Afrofuturism stems from multiple past movements that include Negritude, the Harlem Renaissance, and Black Speculative Thought. Black Speculative Thought began in the 20th century and was used to address racism, African self-determination, black expression, science, and technology. Since then, these original conceptualizations of futurism have morphed into

Afrofuturism 2.0. In moving away from Eurocentric perspectives in the 20th century, Afrofuturism 2.0 allows black scholars and storytellers to reinsert authority over how their stories are told (Anderson, 2016; van Veen & Anderson, 2018). Anderson (2016) defines Afrofuturism 2.0 as:

[T]he early twenty-first century technogenesis of Black identity reflecting counter histories, hacking and or appropriating the influence of network software, database logic, cultural analytics, deep remixability, neurosciences, enhancement and augmentation, gender fluidity, posthuman possibility, the speculative sphere, with transdisciplinary applications and has grown into an important Diasporic techno-cultural Pan African movement. (p. 229).

Influenced by the emergence of social media, the impact of climate change, and the fraying of American hegemony, this new wave of Afrofuturism discusses the global divide that has impacted people of the African diaspora and countries of the Global South from attaining political, social and economic growth (Anderson, 2016).

Several events since 2005 have contributed to Afrofuturism 2.0 including the introduction of social media, the election of Barack Obama, the resurgence of Pan Africanism, and the deaths of several black people through police brutality (Anderson, 2016). These events also paved a way for the creation of a newer movement called the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM), which formed at the 2015 *Unveiling Visions: The Alchemy of the Black Imagination* convention (van Veen & Anderson, 2018). BSAM is an umbrella term used to describe “Afrofuturism 2.0 (Black Quantum Futurism, African Futurism, Afrofuturismo, and

Afrofuturista), Astro Blackness, Afro-Surrealism, Afro-Pessimism, Ethno Gothic, Black Digital Humanities, Black Science Fiction, The Black Fantastic, Magic Realism, and the Esoteric” (Anderson, 2016, p. 233). Since BSAM, Afrofuturism has extended even further to incorporate more aspects of the black identity. In 2018, Thomas coined the term “Afrxfuturism” to describe blackness as being intersectional, cis-heteronormative, and neoliberal. It tags the term, “Afrofuturism,” with an “x” to interrogate the flawed assumption that accomplishments in the diaspora are only made by men. Inspired by the Latinx movement, it rejects white patriarchy and cis-hetero gender binaries and queers the space of the black identity (Thomas, 2018). Afrofuturism aims to acknowledge concerns within the black community in an effort to achieve equity and inclusivity.

### *Criticisms of the Theory*

While Afrofuturism provides a platform for negotiating what has been lost in order to look towards a better future, there are two major critiques of the movement. First, Afrofuturism has been narrowly associated with the African American experience and ignores the experiences of other black identities in the diaspora (Barber et al., 2018; Reese, 2018). Accordingly, Afrofuturists are trying to better represent blacks from Latin America, Asia, and the Arab world. A second critique of the movement is that Afrofuturism tends to romanticize the African experience in media and disregard the smaller, day-to-day activities that occur in Africa. Tchidi Chikere, a Nigerian filmmaker, explains, “Africans are bothered about food, roads, electricity, water wars, famine, etc., not spacecrafts and spaceships” (Hanchey, 2019, p. 325). South African author, Mohale Mashigo, adds, “Our needs, when it comes to imagining futures, or even

reimagining a fantasy present, are different from elsewhere on the globe; we actually live on this continent as opposed to using it as a costume or stage to play out our ideas” (Hanchey, 2019, p. 325). Afrocentric expressions in media are further complicated considering its producers. For example, African Americans hold a unique position in which they have ancestral ties to Africa yet are socialized through Eurocentrism due to our habitation in the West. Most black Americans have never experienced life in Africa, and therefore, must rely on second-hand information. Therefore, it could be beneficial to consider arguments from African thinkers like Chikere and Mashigo to avoid generalizations about African people and appropriating their identities through our Afrofuturist projections.

In this section, the literature revealed how Afrofuturism combines the study of race, technology, and science fiction. First, Afrofuturism was defined as an examination of the past to reimagine the future through the lens of science fiction. Speculative thought allows for the formation of counterhistories and counterfutures to articulate alternative forms of existence. Since Afrofuturism’s inception, the theory has expanded to address the intersectionality of blackness. Despite being criticized, Afrofuturism’s impact on black culture has been seismic. Applying Afrofuturist principles to *BP* and *CRA* hopefully uncovers how these films center prominent discourses within the African and Asian diaspora. In addition, it is interesting to understand how these cultural products are situated within and outside of American popular culture.



## Chapter 5: *Black Panther* Case Study

*Black Panther* (*BP*) resists colonial dominance through its depiction of blackness in mainstream film media, and unlike other science fiction and superhero films it centralizes discourses surrounding race and power. It boldly and unapologetically speaks out against racism and oppression within and outside of the United States. As Hollywood influences one's understanding of race, *Black Panther*'s inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities combats racism and xenophobia and reveals alternate ways in which power is manifested in society. Therefore, this case study addresses how *BP* discusses race and power, seeks to understand why *BP* is a postcolonial text, and explores the ways in which the film uses Afrofuturism to articulate new forms of existence for people of the diaspora.

### **Race & Power**

*BP* acknowledges race as a major theme but focuses more acutely on how hierarchies are arranged and managed within the film through alternate manifestations of power. Power consists of a ruling class that is maintained hegemonically through discourse and determines who can and cannot speak in society. Since *BP* features predominantly black characters, power is manifested through nation and tribe. In this sense, Wakanda has power and maintains that power by excluding others from access to its technology and resources. This notion is demonstrated through T'Challa's quote, "It is not our way to be judge, jury, and executioner for people who are not our own." Wakandans prioritize their own citizens over the rest of the world. Although Wakandans are nonwhite, whiteness ideologies can be extended here to investigate the relationship between Wakandans and outsiders. The study of whiteness examines the privileges that come along with white membership, or in this case, Wakandan membership. The group in

power protects the establishment of whiteness through ideological subordination and bestows privileges based on physical attributes. Similar to white privilege in the Western world, Wakandans also extend social advantages, benefits, and courtesies to its citizens and distinguish themselves based on man-made markings, the Vibranium symbol tattooed on their inner lip.

On a finer scale, the ingroup/outgroup dichotomy can be applied to tribal relationships within the film. The Black Panther Tribe considers itself to be superior to other tribes, and by all appearances they are. Although other tribal leaders are able to challenge for the throne, no one accepts except for M'Baku, the leader of the Jabari Tribe. Early in Wakanda's history, the Jabari Tribe refused to subject themselves to the Black Panther's rule, so they retreated to the mountains. At the challenge M'Baku professes,

We have watched and listened from the mountains! We have watched with disgust as your technological advancements have been overseen by a child! Who scoffs at tradition! And now you want to hand the nation over to this prince who could not keep his own father safe. We will not have it.

The Jabari Tribe refuses to subordinate themselves to the Black Panther Tribe. In addition to isolating themselves in the mountains, challenging for the throne serves as a direct rejection of the Black Panther Tribe's hegemonic domination.

### ***Killmonger's Racial Membership***

The non-Wakandan characters all hold different opinions about Killmonger's race and racial membership. In the film, Killmonger is the son of N'Jobu and the nephew of T'Chaka, the former king of Wakanda. As a result, Killmonger interprets his racial membership as being a descendant of royal Wakandan blood and existing in the larger African diaspora. However,

Killmonger grew up outside of Wakanda and could not reap the benefits of his royal bloodline. After T'Challa expresses that Wakanda does not support people who are not their own (non-Wakandans), Killmonger responds, "Not your own? But didn't life start right here on this continent? So ain't all people your people?" This quote implies that Wakandans view group membership differently than the way Killmonger does.

Agent Ross reveals another perspective of race by identifying Killmonger as belonging to a nation. When Shuri and Okoye ask if Killmonger is Wakandan, Agent Ross informs them that "He's one of ours," meaning that Killmonger is American like him. Agent Ross' quote suggests that he does not solely equate Americanness to whiteness. He acknowledges Killmonger as being American and does not mark his identity with additional ethnicities, such as Wakandan-American or even African American for that matter. Finally, Klaue takes on yet another view of raced identities. He discursively distances the West from the non-West in his comment, "You really want to go to Wakanda? They're savages. This is what they do to people like us," as he points to a scar from being branded. His message employs the "us" versus "them" dichotomy, where he considers himself and Killmonger as "us" and the "savages" (what he calls Wakandans) as "them." Klaue continues, "you can scar yourself as much as you like. To them, you'd just be an outsider. You're crazy to think you could just walk in there." Klaue's quote reinforces the notion that inclusion is determined by the ruling class. Therefore, no matter what Killmonger does, Wakandans will never truly view him as an insider and will not permit him the right to speak.

### *Exploring Identity Through Storytelling*

In accordance with the principles of CRT, postcolonial theory, and Afrofuturism, storytelling is a way for people of color to communicate, articulate, and legitimize their experiences with race and racism. In this case, film is a medium for storytelling that shares the experiences of marginalized individuals. In tandem with the use of storytelling, societies pass down mythologies to explain the unexplainable and sustain their cultural identities. In *BP*, young Erik Killmonger asks his father to tell him the story of home, which is the story of Wakanda and the Black Panther. Although this is *Baba's* actual story, it appears to be a mythology that N'Jobu passes down to his son. Even on his deathbed, Killmonger carries his father's stories close to his heart. He says, "My pop said Wakanda was the most beautiful thing he ever seen. He promised he was gonna show it to me one day. You believe that? Kid from Oakland, running around believing in fairytales." These stories sustain him throughout his childhood and into adulthood, aiding him with the motivation to complete his mission in Wakanda.

Director Ryan Coogler uses *BP* as an opportunity to discuss the black experience on a mainstream platform, and specifically does so through his assertion of Oakland as a prominent setting in the plot. As a native of Oakland, California, Ryan Coogler essentially tells his own story, as well as the stories of many African Americans through Erik Killmonger's character. In the *BP* comics, Killmonger is originally from Wakanda but is kidnapped by Klaue and escapes to Harlem, New York City. Coogler rewrites Killmonger's place of origin as being from Oakland, which could suggest more about Killmonger's overall characterization and motives in returning to Wakanda. Notably, Oakland is the birthplace of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which was a revolutionary political group that believed in protecting black people from police

brutality by any means necessary, including through the use of violence. Although the original comics are not affiliated with the Black Panther Party, it seems as though Coogler models Killmonger's characterization after some of its principles. For instance, Erik Killmonger goes to Wakanda to obtain the tools he believes will liberate his people and will do whatever it takes to achieve justice in his eyes. He claims,

I lived my entire life waitin' for this moment. I trained, I lied, I killed just to get here. I killed in America, Afghanistan, Iraq. I took life from my own brothers and sisters right here on this continent. And all this death just so I could kill you.

Killmonger feels entitled to a position in Wakanda and comes to take his presumed rightful place, demonstrating that he will do anything to obtain and retain it.

The ways in which society organizes itself depends greatly on who has power, and as demonstrated through *BP*, notions of power vary depending on culture. Wakandans have a much different understanding of racial membership than the three Western characters, Killmonger, Agent Ross, and Klaue. In *BP*, national identities supersede race in becoming the ultimate form of power in Wakanda. This alternate articulation of power allows Wakandans to move through their society as free agents. However, this same privilege is not granted to non-Wakandans. Thus, *BP* discusses the affordances characters receive based on group membership, as well as the lengths they will go to obtain and retain that power.

### **Postcolonialism**

Postcolonialism began at the first colonial contact. Colonizers erected imaginary borders to control large groups of people, imposed Western epistemologies, and colonized through discursive ideologies. *BP*'s story discusses life post colonization from two unique perspectives,

one from an African nation that has never been colonized and another from an African American's perspective. Although Wakanda was not colonized, the threat of colonization forced them to conceal themselves and their Vibranium from invaders. Killmonger, on the other hand, experienced more direct consequences of colonization. Therefore, *BP* brings attention to the long-lasting scars left from the legacy of colonization through discourses surrounding colonial dominance and black agency.

### ***Colonial Dominance***

*BP* can be read as a postcolonial text because it overtly criticizes colonization. In the scene where Erik Killmonger visits a West African art exhibit in the Museum of Great Britain, he asks to speak with an expert to learn more about the artifacts. The expert explains that one of the axes is from the Fula Tribe in Benin; however, Killmonger corrects her saying that it was actually taken from Wakanda and offers to take it off of her hands. He challenges, "How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price?" Killmonger is referencing how colonizers ravaged lands and stole many sacred artifacts.

This connects back to Spivak's (2010) claim that it is nearly impossible for the West to study the non-West (the subaltern) without employing colonial discourses. The subaltern represents groups of people living outside of the West whose voices have been muted. Based on assumptions about non-Western cultures, Spivak (2010) argues that Western scholars produce misleading scholarship by using their own languages to discuss the East and congratulate themselves for aiding the Other. It is also interesting that the exhibit is located in Great Britain, a nation known for its colonial history. As a native of the West, the exhibit expert relies on her colonial knowledge. Her inaccuracies demonstrate that even the colonizers did not, and could

not, understand the non-West. She negligently erases the history of an entire group of people by misconstruing her facts, thus her inaccurate assertion discounts Wakandan history in the process. This example ultimately reveals how history is controlled by the people holding the pen, that is, through the perspective of the group in power.

### **Colonial Impacts in Wakanda.**

Although Wakanda was never colonized, it is not immune to its horrific impacts. After Agent Ross wakes up from his surgery and walks around the laboratory, Shuri instinctively exclaims, “Don’t scare me like that colonizer!” Visibly confused, he informs her that his name is Everett. Shuri responds, “Yes, I know. Everett Ross, former air force pilot and now CIA.” Shuri’s use of the loaded term ‘colonizer’ confirms her understanding of the significance of colonization worldwide. It also reveals how she subconsciously associates the presence of a white man in Wakanda with colonialism. Since *BP* is a story that opposes colonial dominance, Shuri’s character reinserts authority over the situation. She is not controlled by the same systems of power that impact the world outside of Wakanda. Instead, she brings attention to how power shifts in a postcolonial, Afrofuturistic world as a young black scientist who has full control over Agent Ross’ survival, as well as her own.

### ***The Oppressed Becomes the Oppressor***

Although Killmonger appears to be the villain, he is actually the victim. As a child, Killmonger was abandoned in Oakland after T’Chaka killed his father, N’Jobu. During his Ancestral Plane scene, he and his father are trapped in Oakland, disconnected from their ancestors in Wakanda. Unfortunately, Killmonger exists in limbo because he is not fully Wakandan but feels estranged from the U.S. due to the injustices there. This abandonment causes

him to seek power to avenge his oppressors. Compared to T'Challa, Killmonger grew up experiencing racism, oppression, and marginalization. Without those experiences, Killmonger believes that T'Challa is ill-equipped to handle Wakanda's resources and views him as an obstacle in liberating his people. After taking the throne as king, he deploys Wakanda's weapons and declares,

You know, where I'm from when black folks started revolutions, they never had the firepower or the resources to fight their oppressors. Where was Wakanda? Yeah, all that ends today. We got spies embedded in every nation on Earth. Already in place. I know how colonizers think. So we're gonna use their own strategy against 'em. We're gonna send Vibranium weapons out to our War Dogs. They'll arm oppressed people all over the world so they can finally rise up and kill those in power. And their children. And anyone else who takes their side. It's time they know the truth about us! We're warriors! The world's gonna start over, and this time, we're on top. The sun will never set on the Wakandan empire.

Ironically, Killmonger attempts to gain power in the same manner that his oppressors obtained theirs. In claiming to know how colonizers think, he assumes that the only way to amass power is through violence. By extension, the oppressed becomes the oppressor.

### **The Wakandan Empire.**

After taking the throne, Killmonger delivers a speech communicating his intention to supply Wakanda's War Dogs with Vibranium weapons to fight his oppressors. In his speech, he reimagines a world in which Wakanda is the most powerful nation on earth and envisions a reversal of colonial history to avenge the violence committed against his people. In calling for



the domination of his oppressors Killmonger declares, “The sun will never set on the Wakandan empire.” This declaration relates to the actual colonial phrase, “The sun never sets on the British Empire,” and explains the vastness of Great Britain’s power at the peak of its colonial history. Killmonger wants to model his domination after nations like Great Britain who expanded their empires by using violence to colonize and oppress their victims and he recognizes that Wakanda has the power to do so.

***Black Agency: Rejecting the White Savior Trope***

In the past, Western media has portrayed Africa and African people as helpless and impoverished victims. The white savior is a cinematic trope that depicts whites from the West saving people from the non-West. It assumes that nonwhites cannot help themselves or speak for themselves. Growing up, I remember seeing commercials from charitable organizations depicting how we (as Americans) could help hungry children in Africa. The camera would capture orphanages located in hut communities and feature crying babies with bloated stomachs. This was unfortunately my first view of Africa. These distorted images were imprinted on my young, developing mind and ultimately influenced how I viewed an entire continent of people, as well as myself as a person of African descent. These portrayals ignore the ways in which African countries are self-sufficient societies with resources to sustain its people.

However, *BP* rejects the white savior trope by depicting Africa as efficient, wealthy, and technologically advanced, and positions African people as having complete agency over their own lives. Although Wakanda is perceived as one of the poorest countries in the world, it refuses international aid. Besides having the resources to completely sustain themselves, they understand that accepting outside help would put the West in control. In another scene, the stereotypical

white savior trope is reimagined when T'Challa, Nakia, and Okoye bring Agent Ross to Wakanda to save him after he is shot in Korea. When they arrive Shuri states, "Great! Another broken white boy for us to fix. This is going to be fun." Using their technology, Shuri heals Agent Ross from his gunshot wound overnight. Her comment indicates that they have saved other non-Wakandans in the past. Instead of the West helping them, Wakanda uses its resources to save the West, which totally reverses Western assumptions about international aid and the white savior trope.

Killmonger's desire for self-liberation is inspired by his father, N'Jobu. In 1992, King T'Chaka confronts N'Jobu about stealing Wakanda's weapons, in which N'Jobu argues that he only took them to fight back and protect his community in Oakland. He states,

I observed for as long as I could. Their leaders have been assassinated. Communities flooded with drugs and weapons. They are overly policed and incarcerated. All over the planet our people suffer because they don't have the tools to fight back. With Vibranium weapons, they could overthrow every country and Wakanda could rule them all the right way.

Like Killmonger, N'Jobu witnesses some of the injustices black people face first-hand. Thus, this newfound understanding leads him to take action. Overall, he does not look to the West but to his home country, Wakanda, in assisting his community in Oakland and recognizes that Wakanda's resources allow for complete liberation and autonomy for black people across the diaspora.

This section assays how *BP* combats colonial dominance and promotes black agency through discourse in the film. As a postcolonial text, *BP* castigates colonization to interrogate

taken-for-granted notions about power, domination, and agency. Further, the film centers the experiences of two groups within the African diaspora that include Wakandans and African Americans. Since this film is marketed to a mainstream American audience, it demonstrates that the black experience is not monolithic and presents black life dynamically in media.

### **Afrofuturism**

Afrofuturism positions people of color in a future world without marginalization (Fitzpatrick, 2018). It explores the black identity through science fiction and combines African art, mythology, science, and technology. Although blackness has historically been associated with negativity in the West, Afrofuturism challenges those previous portrayals of black people in all forms of media and presents them as capable of achieving anything. *BP* includes creators (writers, actors, directors, and costume designers) from all over the African diaspora. To exemplify Afrofuturism, the film celebrates African cultures through the decentering of Western knowledge systems and envisions progress through technological advancements.

### ***Decentering Western Knowledge Systems***

*BP* decenters Western knowledge, traditions, and authority by integrating aspects of African cultures such as languages, tribes, and religions. Languages such as Xhosa (a language spoken in South Africa) and Swahili (a Bantu language that is now spoken in several African countries) are woven seamlessly throughout dialogue in the film. *BP* also references titles that are commonly used in some African cultures, such as ‘*Baba*’ and ‘shaman.’ In addition, all of the characters have African-inspired names like N’Jobu, M’Baku, Nakia, Okoye, and W’Kabi. Next, *BP* groups Wakandan citizens into tribes, which repudiates Western ways of thinking about borders in Africa. It undermines how the Western colonizers reorganized Africa into countries

even though there were pre-existing tribal borders. As Wakandan tribes are based on actual African tribes, the characters are also outfitted in tribal-inspired clothing with intricate patterns and colors. Aspects of Afrocentrism expressed in the film celebrates African cultures in mainstream media. In all, *BP*'s choice to decenter Western knowledge grants marginalized people room to speak for themselves.

Postcolonial literature explains how the science fiction genre distances science from religion in Western science fiction texts. Regarding Afrofuturism in *BP*, however, science and religion exist harmoniously. For instance, Wakanda is the most technologically advanced nation in the world, yet Wakandans hold its gods, goddesses, and ancestors in high regard. Additionally, Wakanda observes religion through an Afrocentric lens and completely disregards religions spread by the West. For instance, there is no mention of any other religion outside of their ancestral worship and the worship of the Panther Goddess Bast. They exhibit their faith through messages like "Glory to Bast, I am in good health," "Glory to Hanuman," and "Praise the ancestors." Unlike in many Western cultures, Wakandans revere their ancestors in life and after death.

### ***Technology***

*BP* mixes traditional aspects of life with modernity specifically through its use of weapons, architecture, and technology. Wakanda itself is a mixture of traditional farms and markets with modern skyscrapers and an efficient underground rail system. Wakandans use spears, shields, and arrows to fight off villains, as well as high tech Vibranium weapons like T'Challa's energy-absorbing suit, Nakia's rings, and Shuri's arm cannons. Much of Wakanda's power and self-sufficiency derives from its advancement of Vibranium technology. In the film,

Shuri creates kimoyo beads to use for communication, access to information, and healing; all Wakandans have access to technology through these kimoyo beads as well. One of the most impressive functions of the kimoyo beads is its ability to stabilize Agent Ross from his gunshot wound. Lastly, a similar device allows Shuri to remotely drive a bullet-proof car from her laboratory through the streets of Busan. Wakandan technology is so superior and so advanced that Okoye considers Klaue's weapons to be "primitive" by comparison.

Technology is the method by which Wakanda surpasses all other nations. Its presence in the film also serves as inspiration for black people to pursue interests in technology. Similar to its impacts in the film, knowledge of technology can potentially become an equalizer for people of the African diaspora. This aspect of the story is particularly important due to Afrofuturism's desire to close the technology gap that has left some members of the black community technologically illiterate in the 21st century. As technology is one of the fastest growing industries worldwide, educating black people about technology will provide them with additional opportunities to contribute to society. Leggon (1995) believes that it will also allow formerly excluded groups to share their perspectives and ensure that black people are advocated for in the future.

### ***Western Expressions of Afrofuturism***

Acquired by the Walt Disney Company, Marvel is an American entertainment company that produces its films in Hollywood and targets its content to a predominantly Western audience. As a result, Marvel could be criticized for Westernizing African cultures in *BP*. While *BP*'s release empowers creators of color to write and produce Afrodiasporic stories, there is concern that black creators in the West are bound by Hollywood's hegemonic conventions. In

other words, the West still may possess power through its Western black creators. For instance, *BP* was written and produced by Ryan Coogler who is an African American man. While Coogler may have attempted to center African experiences, there are elements that he may never understand due to the fact that he is not African, has never lived in Africa, and therefore must rely on second-hand experiences. Although some African American people educate themselves on African cultures, it is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to completely remove one's Western lens. As a result of living in the West, African Americans may also hold uninterrogated notions about the non-West, including Africa. The hope is that black creators surround themselves with other creators in the diaspora to avoid rash generalizations about African cultures. Some critics claim that Afrofuturism prioritizes African American stories and romanticizes Africa through its depictions in Hollywood; accordingly, it also becomes important to open up the conversation to include the entire diaspora as to not privilege the voices of blacks residing in the West.

Conclusively, this chapter discussed how power is reimagined in Wakandan society through national identity as opposed to race. Without the threat of racial discrimination and marginalization, it shows a nation where black people thrive. Next, it explored the effects of colonization, highlighting aspects of the African American experience and of the African experience. Lastly, *BP* uses Afrofuturism as a tool to envision a better future for all people in the African diaspora. *BP* is an entertaining, Afrofuturistic phenomenon that displays Afrodiasporic stories in mainstream media, igniting discussions about race, power, and identity. Films like *BP* spark vital conversations about racial and ethnic equality in American media and demonstrate the

importance for creators of color to continue to open doors for more groundbreaking projects to come.

## Chapter 6: *Crazy Rich Asians* Case Study

Hollywood devotes greater attention to its depictions of white characters than ethnic minorities. This lack of prioritization leads to poor representations of Asians and Asian Americans in Hollywood. *CRA* is the first film to feature an all-Asian cast since the release of *Joy Luck Club* in 1993. In *CRA*, director Jon M. Chu demonstrates that Asian people are not monolithic and compares and contrasts the lives of two identity groups within the Asian diaspora that include middle-class Chinese-Americans and upper-class Chinese-Singaporeans. Tensions between these two subject positions highlight variances between Asian cultures in the U.S. versus in Asia. *CRA*'s inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities also combats racism and xenophobia in Hollywood and reveals alternate ways in which power is manifested in society. This case study analyzes how *CRA* challenges hegemonic depictions of ethnic minorities in Hollywood through dynamic portrayals of Asian and Asian-American characters in mainstream media, discusses issues within the Asian diaspora that relate to race, class, and identity, and examines Western influences present in the film.

### **Challenging Hollywood's Hegemonic Depictions of Asia**

*CRA* centers Asian and Asian-American experiences by specifically honing in on Chinese-Singaporean culture. The characters' backgrounds express the vastness of the Asian diaspora and address how cultures and ideologies vary accordingly. For example, the film follows the lives of two families: the Youngs and the Chus. The Young family moved from China to Singapore generations back, but the Chus are first and second generation Chinese-Americans. The film specifically uses Rachel Chu and Nick Young's relationship to explain cultural differences between Asians from the continent of Asia and Asians from the



United States. *CRA* spotlights languages, traditions, values, and cuisines of Singapore. Similar to *BP*, language is intrinsic to connecting characters to their cultures and homelands. *CRA* infuses dialogue in Mandarin and Hokkien to highlight how power is also manifested through language among Singaporean elites. The film specifically uses English and Mandarin as the dominant languages to unite characters from the East and the West. Further, Mandarin is positioned as the language of the privileged when compared to Hokkien, a dialect spoken by poorer Singaporeans. The film also touches on Chinese traditions such as making dumplings with the family and playing *mahjong*.

In *CRA*, the Singaporean characters hold more collectivistic values, which insinuates that the American characters are less family-oriented by comparison. The Young family shares a closer relationship with their distant family members compared to Rachel and her mother. At the family dinner Rachel states, "It's just great seeing you guys all like this. When I was growing up it was just me and my mom, which I loved. But we didn't really have a big family like this. It's really nice." The Young family also expects each member to take part in the family business and support each other before pursuing one's own ambitions. When Eleanor first hears about Rachel's passion for her profession she says, "Pursuing one's passion. How American." Being from the United States, Rachel does not have this same sense of collectivism and is criticized by Eleanor for not putting her family first. After Eleanor tells the story of how she dropped out of college to support her husband, she directs her disapproval at Rachel and says,

For me, it was a privilege. But for you, you may think it's old-fashioned. It's nice you appreciate this house and us being here wrapping dumplings. But all this doesn't just happen. It's because we know to put family first, instead of chasing one's passion.

This scene shows Eleanor's disapproval for Rachel. Since Rachel is American, Eleanor believes that she lacks tradition and family values. The film also discusses the tradition of passing down artifacts to newer generations. Because Ah Ma did not approve of Eleanor, she did not pass down her wedding ring. With that, Eleanor expresses her intention to do the same to Rachel. The dynamic between Rachel and Eleanor establishes how power is allocated in the film. The society within the film has constructed certain expectations and norms that determine whether an outsider is acceptable. As referenced by Eleanor, members of the family must prioritize the family and its traditions but since Rachel could not meet those expectations, she was ostracized.

### ***Non-stereotypical Characterizations of Asian and Asian-American People in Media***

Western media generalize the lives of ethnic minorities in the West and outside of the West, but *CRA* offers something different that has not been accomplished in Hollywood. One common issue in Hollywood films is that Asian and Asian-American characters are underdeveloped and depicted stereotypically. Therefore, Chu sought to portray multi-dimensional, complex individuals to improve the development of its characters and stories. For example, in one scene Nick describes his family in detail to Rachel: Alistair is directing a movie in Taiwan, Eddie works in finance in Hong Kong, and Astrid is a fashion icon and socialite from Shanghai. The major characters in the Young family are given their own unique stories, backgrounds, and struggles. Chu also focuses on the development of Eleanor's character. Although she appears to be the villain, her shrewdness comes from trying to win Ah Ma's love and acceptance. Instead of coping with rejection, she perpetuates her feelings of inadequacy onto Rachel. She tells Rachel that "You will never be enough." Since Eleanor does not come from a wealthy family either, she projects that same stigma onto Rachel, which further distances herself

from traits that the elite Singaporean class regards as undesirable. Unlike other representations of Asian and Asian Americans in film, the writers and directors of *CRA* crafted each character's story with care, presenting them as complex individuals. This attention to detail makes the characters feel more real and communicates their relatability on a human level.

Chu also plays with common Asian stereotypes to demonstrate their absurdity. For example, when Peik Lin's little sisters ask to go play on the trampoline, their father tells them to finish their nuggets because "There's a lot of children starving in America." This comment is a dig at how Western nations like the U.S. assume that non-Western countries are impoverished or are in constant need of Western aid. It counteracts the white savior trope, the assumption that whites in the West must save people living in the non-West. *CRA* makes it abundantly clear that the Singaporean characters do not need Western assistance because they have amassed extreme wealth on their own. The families featured in *CRA* are completely different from Western notions of Asia and Asian people.

### ***The Model Minority Myth***

The model minority myth is the assumption that Asian-American immigrants are always industrious, high achieving, and highly educated (Chang, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). While *CRA* reflects more developed characters, it does not completely abandon the model minority myth. Rachel believes that her hard-work and high-achievement will win over Nick's family. She says, "They're Chinese, I'm Chinese. I'm so Chinese [that] I'm an economics professor with lactose intolerance." Other characters also reference her profession. To impress his mother, Nick describes Rachel as being above and beyond and says, "And she's brilliant. NYU's youngest faculty member." Rachel's achievements are also compared to that of Peik

Lin's. When Peik Lin's family learns that Rachel is an economics professor her father laments, "Very impressive... Let me get this straight. You both went to the same school, yet someone came back with a degree that's useful. And the other one came back as Asian Ellen." The film never brings attention to how the characters praise Rachel for adhering to the model minority myth, so its reluctance to interrogate this idea implies its acceptability in the film.

Overall, *CRA* challenges hegemonic stereotypes that circulate through Western media by presenting fully-developed stories about Asians and Asian Americans. It exposes Western audiences to stories that are not generally told in Hollywood and works to change negative perceptions about people of Asian descent.

### **Raced Identities**

The desire for whiteness in society examines the privileges that come along with white membership (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Whiteness wields power from an uninterrogated position and is constituted through discursive practices to reinforce white dominance (Warren, 2001). Whiteness is understood to be malleable and constantly in flux (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Warren & Twine, 1997). In the opening scene of *CRA*, the Young family enters a luxury hotel in London called the Calthorpe Hotel but are denied service from the employees who happen to be white men. Although the Young family appears to be wealthy and are dressed in designer clothing, the employees refuse to honor their hotel reservation. Because of their race, the hotel manager denies them access to the Calthorpe Hotel and suggests that they find accommodations in Chinatown. The Young family's presence threatens their ability to maintain whiteness, so the employees feel that it is their duty to police who can and cannot stay at the hotel. After being refused service at the Calthorpe Hotel, the Young family decides to purchase

it. Eleanor's purchase of the hotel is an act bigger than itself; it demonstrates how the Young family has achieved privileges through their wealth and property ownership. Overall, this first scene exhibits how the film plans to address the topic of race where power is held not by race per se, but by class and nationality.

As a second generation Chinese person, Rachel Chu grew up in New York City with only her mother and had no ties to family back in China. Her cultural identity is strongly influenced by her upbringing in the United States, and her ideas of the East are filtered through her mother's experiences. In the scene where she is shopping with her mother, she picks up a blue and white cocktail dress but her mother stresses that she cannot wear that dress to meet Nick's Ah Ma because "Blue and white is for Chinese funerals." Her mother holds up a red dress instead and says, "Now this, this symbolizes good fortune and fertility." Rachel scoffs at her mother's advice but takes it anyway. This interaction suggests that Rachel does not connect with Chinese culture in the same way that her mother does, who is of the first generation and part of a group that generally maintains stronger ties to mainland China.

In explaining the differences between Chinese-American and Chinese-Singaporean culture, her mother states, "It's just Nick bringing a girl all the way there to meet them can mean a lot to these overseas families. They're different from us." Rachel's mother employs the "us" versus "them" paradigm, but she does not distance the 'Other' as inferior. However, her comments do suggest ideological differences that Rachel, and the audience, soon becomes aware of. Rachel's limited knowledge about Chinese culture leads her to naively assume that Nick's family will automatically accept her because "They're Chinese. I'm Chinese," but her mother clarifies that "Yeah, but you grew up here. Your face is Chinese. You speak Chinese. But here,

and here, you're different." This conversation testifies to the vastness of the Asian diaspora, proclaiming that Asians are not monolithic. Asian cultures vary greatly and influence everything from family traditions to ideological positions. Although Rachel is ethnically Chinese, her identity as an Asian-American woman clearly differentiates her in relation to race and class.

Since all of the characters in *CRA* are of Asian descent, certain social classes and nationalities become marked identities. To demonstrate this alternate organization of power, the film juxtaposes Rachel's family with Nick's family. After immigrating to the U.S., Rachel's mother did not speak English and had to work several jobs to make ends meet. Therefore, she now wholeheartedly supports Rachel in pursuing her passions. However, Eleanor views Rachel as inferior and tells her that "You're not our own kind... [You are] a foreigner. American. And all Americans think about is their own happiness." In another conversation, Nick explains how he thought his mother would be happy that he brought home a Chinese professor, but Eleanor corrects him saying, "Chinese American." This demonstrates that Rachel will never be enough even if she does everything right. Simply being Chinese-American disqualifies her from inclusion within the upper-class Singaporean society.

### ***Wealth & Class***

In *CRA*, the wealthier characters hold power in society. Accordingly, these characters dictate inclusions and exclusions and establish roles and rituals through discursive practices. On the other hand, the poorer characters are discriminated against and are not given a platform from which to speak. For instance, Oliver is a second-cousin to the Young family but describes himself as "one of the poorer relations. The rainbow sheep of the family. But I make myself useful. Whatever the Youngs want, I procure." All of the wealthy characters enjoy the benefits of

living in Singapore's high-class society and are invited to the family's exclusive events, such as Colin and Araminta's wedding and bachelor/bachelorette parties. In contrast, characters like Oliver live on the margins of Singaporean society and are never invited to the center. Even in the film, Oliver is not invited to the wedding and only assists Rachel in preparing for the big event, taking on the role as servant.

At the end of the film, Rachel criticizes the elite Singaporean society's subordination of certain national and social class identities. She objects the Young family's attempts to disempower her and says,

I'm not leaving 'cause I'm scared or because I think I'm not enough. Because maybe for the first time in my life, I know I am. I just love Nick so much. I don't want him to lose his mom again. So I just wanted you to know that one day, when he marries another lucky girl who is enough for you, and you're playing with your grandkids while the *tan huas* are blooming and the birds are chirping, that it was because of me. A poor, raised by a single mother, low class, immigrant nobody.

Understanding that the dominated hegemonically participate in their own domination, Rachel addresses the ways in which the family has been oppressive and refuses to accept the dominated position. This speaks to the manifestation of power in the film but could also be extended to reject forces of power outside of the film. It demonstrates that all people hold value regardless of their background, whether that is through social class, ethnicity, or even race.

Many of the wealthier characters attend Ivy League institutions in the West, such as New York University, Columbia University, and the University of Cambridge. Even Peik Lin's father expresses pride in attending college at Cal State Fullerton in the U.S. This migration is viewed as

a way to achieve upward mobility and it shows that the Singaporean characters have made it. As a result, the wealthy Singaporean characters have greatly increased their cultural capital.

### **Westernizing Asian Cultures**

Some of the characters in the film place significant value on Western ways of life. The choice to center Western culture in this way could be a strategy to appeal to a Western audience. Perhaps Chu wants people from multiple backgrounds to envision themselves reflected back through the film's characters. While including some Western elements could help depict Asian and Asian-American characters non-stereotypically, it can also be read as a (re)centering of Western culture in an Asian, specifically Singaporean, society. *CRA* promotes Western practices and accentuates Western food, decor, entertainment, and education in Eastern life.

Peik Lin's family (the Gohs), in particular, seems to be mesmerized by American culture. While giving Rachel a tour of the family home, Peik Lin's mother explains that "We were inspired by the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles," in which Peik Lin adds, "And Donald Trump's bathroom." Next, the Goh family has three dogs named Astor, Vanderbilt, and Rockefeller, all of which are named after three prominent American families. In reference to their meals, the Goh family serves chicken nuggets alongside Chinese food. The family also relates to Western entertainment. Because of Peik Lin's short, blond haircut, her father claims that she looks like "Asian Ellen," referring to American comedian/talk show host Ellen DeGeneres. Lastly, when Peik Lin sees Nick Young for the first time she states, "Damn, Rachel. He's like the Asian *Bachelor*," which is a reference to the American television show, *The Bachelor*. These examples show that the film was deliberately created to gain the acceptance of an American audience. In trying to combat racism and xenophobia, it sends the message that "I'm just like you." However,



in an attempt to express common interests, these Western influences fuel Eurocentric/Americentric beliefs of superiority.

Lastly, *CRA* uses extreme affluence to attract an American audience. First, it highlights opulence and glamour throughout the film and brings attention to multimillion-dollar mansions, exotic cars, and lavish parties. The film is preoccupied with its depiction of exuberant wealth. Concurrently, however, the film subverts poorer characters. As mentioned in the context chapter, the few South and Southeast Asian characters (guards armed with bayonets) are not given speaking roles. Even Oliver (Nico Santos), portrayed by a Filipino-American actor, is subservient to the Young family. His kinship is described as distant, while many of the other characters share privileges with the main Young family. Although it is exciting to see opulence on screen, it distracts from the brooding undercurrent of race and power. It is as if the director uses affluence as the film's insurance plan in case mainstream audiences do not appreciate its diversity.

This chapter discussed whiteness, hegemonic depictions of Asian and Asian-American characters, raced identities, and the Westernization of Asian cultures in *CRA*. While there are some elements that demonstrate Western influences, *CRA* centers Asian stories and challenges stereotypical narratives about Asian and Asian-American people in film media. Exclusions and misrepresentations of certain racial or groups in media relegates them to inferior positions. When diversity is not prioritized in film, people assume that it is also not a priority in society. However, racial and ethnic inclusivity in Hollywood has the power to change how Americans understand and respond to race. Nonetheless, this film serves as a solid foundation from which to produce more projects that feature Asian and Asian-American stories. Therefore, it remains important to

continue to discuss issues of race and power as it relates to racial and ethnic minorities in Hollywood.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this thesis project, I argued that the inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities in film combats racism and xenophobia in the United States. My analysis of *BP* and *CRA* reveals alternate ways in which power is manifested in society. The context surrounding these films affirm how the Academy determines which films get recognized in Hollywood, as well as which films are produced in the future. Through #OscarsSoWhite, people of color demanded that the Academy include more minorities to increase its diversity. Since then, the release of films like *BP* and *CRA* marked a turning point in Hollywood and proved that minority stories have value among a mainstream audience. Using critical rhetoric, I examined erased identities to expose who has power in society. Further, this method centers minority voices by empowering marginalized individuals to tell their own stories. Through CRT, postcolonialism, and Afrofuturism, the literature explained how race is constructed, deconstructed, and reimaged in society. As demonstrated in the case studies, *BP* ignites discussions about race, identity, and injustice in the black community. Likewise, *CRA* challenges stereotypical narratives and offers a more dynamic representation of Asian and Asian Americans in Hollywood. Lastly, both films exhibit how power functions through nation and class in addition to race.

### Implications

Hollywood has used its influence to marginalize ethnic minorities through stereotypical depictions in film. Highlighting some stories over others, Hollywood maintains whiteness by communicating which groups have power through implicit messaging; as a result, ethnic minority stories are filtered through Eurocentric conventions and viewers of mainstream media adopt misinformed notions about people of color. However, through *BP* and *CRA* Ryan Coogler

and Jon M. Chu created films that reflect the voices of people from the African and Asian diaspora. Nonetheless, invisibility on screen contributes to the erasure of cultural identities; therefore, creating inclusive Hollywood films demonstrate that people of color matter to American society. *Black Panther* (2018) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) reflect the experiences of Americans in relation to their descendant cultures. For example, Rachel and Killmonger's stories indicate how minorities, burdened by discrimination, must navigate through the cultures of their descendants to achieve acceptance. Through telling their stories, both films combat racism and xenophobia but in different ways and to different degrees.

*BP* boldly speaks against colonial dominance and centers black life and black experiences. Its use of Afrofuturism allows members of the African diaspora to speculate and envision a brighter future. From the analysis, *BP* was more forceful in highlighting the injustices that black Americans face. This film dives deep into the stories of both the superhero and the villain, which comparable films seldom do. Coogler's choice to develop Killmonger's character humanizes him and communicates an important point, which is that Killmonger's anger derives from a place of abandonment and marginalization. His story speaks to a group of people who have been marked invisible and have had their voices ignored for generations. Broadcasting this film on such a large platform and to a mainstream audience ensures that black stories are seen. When watching *BP*, viewers cannot separate the superhero story from the telling of the black experience. They do not have the choice to circumvent the topic of race and racism because it is embedded in the plot. Although viewers may come to watch a typical Marvel superhero film, they leave with much more, which is an acknowledgement and understanding of the complexities of black experiences across the diaspora.

In addition to portraying aspects of the African American experience, *BP* provides a visual representation of a thriving African society. It resists anti-black sentiments reinforced through Hollywood that African nations are impoverished and destitute. It also disparages the myth that deems blackness as inferior and presents African cultures in such a beautiful and powerful light. *BP* demonstrates that pro-black stories can also be valuable in the larger American culture. As an Afrofuturistic text that employs elements of science fiction, the writers and directors use *BP* as an opportunity to break Hollywood norms. *BP* is certainly not the first mostly-black movie produced in Hollywood, but its success garners attention from a much wider audience. Therefore, *BP* is a catalyst for black stories and invites people from all cultural backgrounds to participate in the celebration and acknowledgment of black culture within mainstream American culture.

*CRA* combats racism and xenophobia differently than *BP*. *CRA* captivates its audience through a celebration of Chinese-American and Chinese-Singaporean cultures on the big screen. The production and cinematography beautifully present Singaporean architecture, food, fashion, and more. Compared to previous portrayals in media which have subjected Asian and Asian Americans to violence, humiliation, and misrepresentation, *CRA* opposes these harmful portrayals and illustrates non-stereotypical images of its characters. However, by comparison *CRA* was not as forceful as *BP* in denouncing hegemonic racism or rejecting Western ideologies. Although it briefly discusses racial discrimination in the opening scene where the Young family visits the Calthorpe Hotel, its primary focus is to celebrate Chinese-Singaporean culture through a classic romantic comedy film. *CRA* only hints at the idea of rebuking Western dominance but never follows through. For example, after Peik Lin's little sisters ask to go play on the

trampoline, her father tells them to finish their chicken nuggets because “There’s a lot of children starving in America.” Although tongue-in-cheek, comments like these do not forcefully take a stand in rebuking Western dominance. The most egregious comments about race and class come from Eleanor and are directed toward Rachel for being American. It seems as though *CRA*’s ultimate goal is to break down stereotypes, which it largely does, but in a safe manner that would not risk dismissal of the film.

The way *CRA* approaches some stereotypes, however, is somewhat concerning. It not only applies symbols of wealth and success to lure in an American audience, but it appears to Westernize Asian cultures through its incorporation of Western references. This is problematic because it reinforces the idea that the finer things in life are found in the West and that Western standards are superior. It would have been more impactful if the film did more to decenter and reject Western paradigms. *CRA* does not openly discuss struggles over race. Although these struggles exist in the film, viewers would have to dig deeper to unmask evidence of such themes. The significance of *CRA* is based on the presence of the film itself in Hollywood and not necessarily on the plot. Nevertheless, *CRA* proves that films featuring developed, non-stereotypical Asian and Asian-American characters can indeed perform well, if not better than other romantic comedies in the box office. Thereby, its success has since inspired the creation of newer roles for Asian and Asian-American actors.

### ***Racial Implications of Equitable & Inclusive Films in U.S.***

Although popular media has not positively represented people of color in the past, it has the power to change and reconstruct the way audiences view racial and ethnic minorities moving forward. Equitable and inclusive films can increase understanding about race in the United States

by raising awareness about one's own racial attitudes and biases and increasing knowledge about other cultures. The recent growth in racial and ethnic visibility in media presents people of color as equals in society. These portrayals also work to depict characters of color and their experiences as more complex, which coincides with the notion that humanity is complex in and of itself. The construction of characters as multifaceted individuals allows white audiences to find commonalities with people of color, presenting them as also human with hopes, dreams, stories, pasts, presents, and futures.

As gatekeepers in Hollywood, film producers use media as a tool to hold immense power over their audience. These media messages control the construction of social realities through the implicit and explicit promotion of dominant ideologies. As a result, racial images in entertainment media influence the way viewers understand racial categorizations of people (Yuen, 2019). In terms of media effects, people also engage with film media to learn about unfamiliar topics and other people. When mainstream viewers have little contact with people of color, they especially rely on media to formulate ideas about them. Sparks (2013) applies the theory of social learning to explain how media messages teach and reinforce existing ideas about behavior and communication. When characters on screen perform a certain behavior, the consequences of their actions are usually rewarded or ridiculed. A reward would assume acceptance of that action and encourage one to repeat it, while ridicule would discourage repetition of that same action in reality.

Nevertheless, the demographic makeup of the U.S. is steadily shifting, so media should become a reflection of our changing society as well. Therefore, Yuen (2019) argues that Hollywood studios should work to achieve diversity by hiring staff and creators that reflect

members of society in terms of ethnicity, race, and gender. Next, studios should set hiring targets until their staff better represents the U.S. population. Finally, studios should establish network mentoring programs by pairing new hires with more experienced people. Unfortunately, people fear what they do not know or cannot understand. The ultimate goal should be for Hollywood to attract and retain more people of color. Inclusive media can interrupt Hollywood's tendency to maintain its status quo and foster anti-racism, allowing viewers to understand that there are more similarities between humans despite cultural differences.

### **Limitations & Future Research**

Approaching this project, I wanted to study films that feature ethnic minorities in the United States, specifically stories about black, Asian, Native American, and Latinx communities. Unfortunately, I found that there are not many recently-released Hollywood films available that center the experiences of ethnic minorities in the United States, which further demonstrates the need to study inclusivity in Hollywood. Since *BP* and *CRA* were released within six months of each other and feature casts of color, I presumed that they would be a good fit for my case study. However, the analysis suggests that both films combat racism and xenophobia in the U.S. but in different ways and to much different degrees. *BP* is more forceful than *CRA* and that can be attributed to its sci-fi genre. As a result, if this study were to be repeated in the future, I recommend choosing films with similar genres so that the research might reveal even more significant findings.

For future research, scholars could explore films on streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video. These streaming services generally offer more programs that feature people of color and better represent racial minorities than Hollywood productions. With



less institutional restrictions, directors and producers are free to tell stories that reflect changes in American society. Next, I used Afrofuturism as one of my theoretical lenses. As a somewhat new theory, I hope to see it address the following in the future. First, Afrofuturism is a form of science fiction, but it has been criticized for failing to properly represent African life.

Accordingly, scholars could study how Afrofuturistic expressions impact portrayals of African life. As black cultures vary greatly across the diaspora, it is necessary to examine which lives are prioritized as a result. Second, Afrofuturism claims to reflect the interests of everyone in the African diaspora, however, cultural products created by African American people, who happen to reside in the West, seem to receive more attention globally. In response, scholars could work to further interrogate how power functions and manifests itself in the African diaspora.

In all, scholars of communication and rhetoric studies must work to decolonize our media by continuing to address absences and demand representation for all marginalized groups. As consumers of media, we must not be complacent with simple depictions of people of color. Instead, we must support creators of color to ensure that they are given equal opportunities to speak for themselves and share their own stories. As we strive for more inclusive representations of people of color, we can simultaneously work to dismantle the stronghold of racism and xenophobia in American society. Overall, it is crucial for conversations about race and representation to continue in Hollywood as to prevent films like *BP* and *CRA* from existing merely as trends.

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