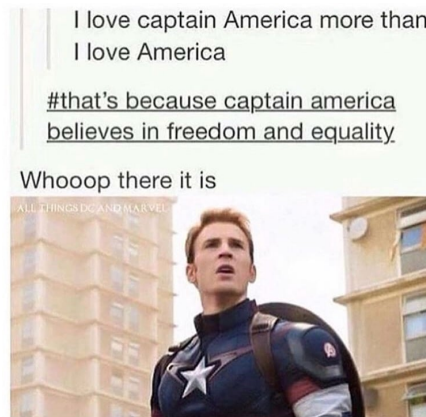


Avengers: Idealist War

How Our Mythical Icons Influence Our Everyday Lives



Before the movie Black Panther was even released, it was a cultural sensation. Not only did it display a full cast of peoples from African descent in powerful, diverse positions, but beyond the people on the screen, it created a new idealism for Africa and Black identity. Termed “Afrofuturism”, Black Panther became more than a superhero movie; it became a celebration of African culture and potential. It was also a reminder of what America strives to be, and a source of hope that we still have that potential somewhere inside us. Alongside the widespread acclaim, however, came a slew of dismissive, perplexed comments along the lines of “it’s just another fantasy movie, what’s the big deal?”

Since 1941, the United States has been avidly consuming the comics and movies of Captain America, an honest underdog who becomes the defender of freedom, beating Nazis and communists and upholding the ideals of equality and honor. He is a national symbol – and yet he too is fictional. There is no wonder-serum that turned Steve Rodgers into a star-spangled soldier, and there was no Captain America leading the charge against evil in World War II, or any other time. Does this mean that our deeply held American values are functionally confined to fantasy?

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The first modern cinematic appearance of Captain America was in 2011, halfway through the Obama administration period, but the character gained significantly more popularity following the introduction of the Avengers in 2012, and Winter Soldier in 2014, and as the new election cycle and its problematic cultural values began to propagate, the popularity of Captain America seemed to rise in tandem. In the modern Marvel cinematic universe, Captain America staunchly upholds highly idealistic, egalitarian values, which fans may find particularly inspiring due to our current political climate, which often appears to disregard the values upon which America was founded. Our current president is notorious for crude language and volatile actions that harm both American citizens and global allies.

Steve Rodgers and T'Challa are the paragon of American values – everything President Trump is not. They are brave, honorable, beautiful, and idealistic to a fault. They love their nations above all else, and fight passionately for equality and hope for all people, even those outside their own country. They are blatantly unrealistic, but still beloved by American citizens for what they represent. The iconography of Captain America is perhaps taken for granted because he one of many typical white, male, western role models, but the popularity of Black Panther provides an excellent reminder of what it means to have a hero. The heroes in our lives aren't usually the people who swoop in and save us from disaster – they're the people who remind us how to save ourselves.

For over two-hundred years, colonized and relocated peoples of African descent have been asking the haunting question “what if”. For African American citizens in particular, the question is particularly morbidly ironic. African Americans live in a country that prides itself equality of life and opportunity, yet 150 years after slavery was abolished, and even 50 years since the end of Jim Crow laws, African Americans still experience 5 times the incarceration rate of white people, are paid only 65% of what white workers make, and live on average 5 to 7 years less than white Americans (Ballantine, 151, 169, 231). The disparities experienced by African Americans as a whole have nothing to do with their individual potential, but can be traced back to significant social inequalities which begin at

Student Example: American Myth Essay

birth – differences in access to education, which in turn affect wealth, and ultimately affect health (Cockerham, 1-26). The American Dream of hard work and individual merit has failed them.

When Americans flocked to theaters to see Black Panther, they saw in Wakanda everything America seemed to be missing. They saw fantastical technology, diversity, national pride, and equality that meant so much more than its appearance:

“[Wakanda] must also function as a place for multiple generations of black Americans to store some of our most deeply held aspirations. We have for centuries sought to either find or create a promised land where we would be untroubled by the criminal horrors of our American existence... black people have populated the Africa of our imagination with our most yearning attempts at self-realization... The point was not verisimilitude or a precise accounting of Africa’s reality. It was the envisioning of a free self. Nina Simone once described freedom as the absence of fear, and as with all humans, the attempt of black Americans to picture a homeland, whether real or mythical, was an attempt to picture a place where there was no fear. This is why it doesn’t matter that Wakanda was an idea from a comic book” (Wallace).

Where do we go from here? If we realize we are not who we thought, how do we decide what we want? In this, our fantasies have critical merit. Without a goal, it’s impossible to make progress. At first, it may seem ridiculous to assign our aspirations for reality to men on a movie screen, until one considers that this is, in fact, how we raise our children. It’s a vital part of our influence over other countries and cultures. Media is important because it has very real power, and if we can harness that power responsibly, finding a balance between inspiration and delusion, then perhaps we can still find our way to a better reality despite our lived experiences.

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