

Behind the mask



black &
biracial identity

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Black cinema achieved new heights with the release of *Black Panther* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* over the past few years. Achieving rave reviews in critical and commercial acclaim, these films have also introduced some of the most complex superheroes to ever grace the silver screen.

T'Challa, better known as Black Panther, is a young black man thrust into a position of power after the death of his father, and must learn to grapple with his loyalty to loved ones and to the ideals he maintains. Mile Morales, the Spider-Man at the centre of *Spider-Verse*, is a biracial teenager living in New York with his parents, when he is bit by a radioactive spider, meets the original Spider-Man himself, and watches as the weight of his universe (and the rest of the alternate ones) hang in the balance of him harnessing his power and growing up.

What these two films present are familiar narratives and tropes within the genre of superhero films that have taken the public discourse by storm over the past decade, but with subversions. They breathe new life into comic book cinema by the sheer complexity of their titular heroes. It not only marks a new milestone in black cinema, but in the field at large, for creating stories with the budget, impact and cultural power to inspire generations and share stories of all backgrounds.

These stories present men of colour defining their masculinity by not only their superheroics, but the complex decisions and relationships that they weave with others over the course of their journey. The titular heroes present new dimensions to black masculinity in a context that is conducive and supportive of their audiences' differences, especially young fans still learning their own powers while they come of age. In doing so, they redefine what it means to be a superhero, a man, and a fluid and shifting identity in today's modern world.

According to J. A. Brown (1999), "classical comic book depictions of masculinity are perhaps the quintessential expression of our cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man" (p. 26). Both *Black Panther* and *Spider-Man* are stories developed by the Marvel brand, and have multiple comic book storylines that have been in print for several decades. What sets the stories presented in the films apart from those of the past are the ways in which they usurp typical expectations of their heroes.

Brown states that the concepts of masculinity in superhero comics is generally defined by "what it is not," and includes traits such as "hard not soft, strong not weak, reserved not emotional, active not passive" (1999, p. 27). Further, the ideals of masculinity often place those of colour into racial stereotypes, as Brown mentions that "the black man has been... place[d] in the symbolic space of being too hard, too physical, too bodily" (p. 28).

Both T'Challa and Miles demonstrate that they have physical strength to save the day, but that their true powers lie in how they handle their emotions, decisions and actions. They do not need to define themselves by the pre-described notions of black masculinity and duality - they can be the man they choose to be, and still save the world (or multiple universes) at the end of the day.

T'Challa's strength comes to light in the relationships he maintains with the other characters, and how he remains loyal to them no matter the course of danger. Whether he is speaking with Nakia about their future as lovers, Okoye in his duties as king and protector of Wakanda, M'Baku as a respected rival, or his ultimate confrontation with Killmonger, T'Challa remains loyal to his identity as a respectful and empathetic man.

According to critic Doc Ayomide (2018), T'Challa's power is emphasized by this loyalty: "while other characters prioritise their chosen loyalty almost exclusively, T'Challa is the one character who seeks to embody all the loyalties in a sort of equilibrium. Where other characters quickly abandon other loyalties in favour of their preferred one, he seeks to maintain each of his loyalties without abandoning the others."

Though T'Challa's strength assists him in defeating Killmonger at the end of *Black Panther*, his final scene with the villain is of an honorable goodbye that shows his compassion to all.

Comparatively, *Spider-Verse* presents an alternative to the mechanisms of power, loyalty and masculinity that are displayed in *Black Panther*, as the story focuses on a teenaged, biracial student who lives in the Bronx named Miles Morales. He comes from a loving family who are

affectionate, fluctuates between a public and private school with social charm despite his insecurities, and is both hard and emotional to possess many layers to his identity.

“Miles goes against so many established superhero tropes,” according to Richard Newby (2018). “He’s not an orphan and instead comes from an unbroken household with two loving and supportive parents. He’s smart and a little nerdy, but not an outsider. And he’s protective of his racial identity, refusing to be limited by it.”

Miles provides a template for any young adult, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic background, or identity, to relate. The ability to map an individual experience to a central character of colour in a major motion picture is one to celebrate, as it speaks to countless possibilities of Miles’ (and the viewers’) futures.

“As much humor as there is in *Into the Spider-Verse*, there’s a very serious consideration given to Miles’ decision of what kind of man he wants to be” (Newby, 2018). Miles’ ability to be himself, and his willingness to learn how to defeat his insecurities without compromising his unique identity, shape his influence on young fans everywhere.

“It’s an affirmation that wearing a hoodie doesn’t make black and brown kids the menaces or thugs that the news media so often portrays them as,” according to Newby (2018). Instead, they are “individuals just as capable of heroism and growth as anyone.”

Both films dwell on the politics of their superheroes explicitly and implicitly, but at the end of the day it is their actions and decisions that speak volumes of their character. If this is the new era of superheroes that young adults are able to rely upon for inspiration, then the next generation will truly be capable of dynamic change.

Further readings on *Black Panther* and *Spider-Verse*:

Kahn, A. (2018, December 31). Spider-Man is straight, but *Into the Spider Verse* is a coming-out story. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/12/31/spider-man-is-straight-into-spider-verse-is-coming-out-story/?utm_term=.26793228c70d

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Richard Newby

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