

**The Intersectionality of Black Masculinity in “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier”**

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## Introduction

In the Marvel Cinematic Universe (the MCU), there have been plenty of white, mostly male, lead characters. Iron Man, Captain America, the Hulk, Doctor Strange, Thor, Starlord -- the list goes on. These male characters are all intrinsically benefitting from race and gender privileges which means the majority of their storylines are not focusing on how their race has impacted them negatively or how their gender has made it harder for them to succeed. This normalization of whiteness in the MCU has completely ignored the conversations people have everyday who are not white or receiving systemic benefits. There are scholars who argue the bottom line with diversity in the MCU is that the films can never reach a point of being truly diverse and free of the white gaze when the characters are still based on comic book heroes who were written by white men.

Black characters in Marvel films have been sparse and rarely receive a spotlight story. One particularly intriguing example of this is in the Captain America movies. Captain America is often portrayed as America's golden boy with his blonde hair, chiseled physique, blue eyes, military past, and undying will to protect the country. However, in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, we are introduced to Sam Wilson for the first time. Wilson is a Black war veteran, but he does not have the supersoldier serum running through his veins like Steve Rogers. As the two quickly become friends, Wilson starts helping Rogers fight throughout the film and is eventually added to the Avengers. Although he wears a suit that allows him to fly and exudes an impressive amount of physical strength, Wilson is still shown as a loyal Black sidekick character. We do not learn about his back story in the films, and we mostly see him jumping in to help Captain America in his endeavors rather than his own personal ones.

With Marvel's latest Disney+ release, "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier," we were finally introduced to Sam Wilson's character in a personal way. The six-episode series took the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement and put it under a magnifying glass by showing us Wilson's life as a Black man in a very real way. Since the series takes place after the white Steve Rogers passed away, Marvel pulls Wilson out of his sidekick role and puts him in the spotlight. He is finally taking on the role of Captain America in the show's finale, but the decision comes after a lot of contemplation. Wilson knows that a Black man holding the famed red, white, and blue shield is going to change how the world sees who Captain America is. Wilson is not oblivious to the systemically racist and biased society he lives in, and his decision to take on the symbolism of fighting with the shield does not come lightly. Through his decision-making process, we see a Black masculinity that is caring, empathetic, intelligent, and educated. My thesis will use content analysis to analyze how Sam's character in the MCU, as the Falcon, is portrayed based on his identity as a Black man, his gender as a male, and how these identities impact his expectation from others in American society. Furthermore, I will compare Wilson's Black American intersectionality to the black masculinities seen in Marvel's *Black Panther*.

### **Literature Review**

Marvel has begun writing and casting characters of different ethnicities and cultures both on-screen and off in its comic books. A recent [scholarly review](#), written by Winona Landis in 2019, covers a newer comic book heroine who is taking on the role of Ms. Marvel. Not to be confused with the blonde, white Captain Marvel in the cinematic universe, played by Brie Larson, Ms. Marvel is a different Marvel character. Kamala Khan, the superhero's real name, is a Pakistani-American 16-year old introduced to Marvel in their post-9/11 comic book era. Landis argues in her article that after 9/11, the company made a move towards releasing more diverse

stories from different American perspectives rather than just a white gaze on what heroism could be. By writing in characters with different religions, traditions, and views on the world, Landis says this not only helps all readers feel seen and represented, but a global audience can gain an understanding and appreciation of these cultures and where people come from. The author describes a particular scene where Kamala receives her powers as Ms. Marvel and how the writers incorporated traditional elements of Hinduism and Islamic culture through the art used and a specific poem read to the character. Landis believes this scene helps set the tone for who Kamala is and how she is both American and Pakistani because there are both Christian and Muslim elements to the story.

The article also talks about a story from the *Washington Post* that talks about how the comic's current character development and content director, Sana Amanat, embeds her own struggle as a Muslim living in America into Kamala's character. Landis says authors often use relatable characters to deliver important messages throughout their stories that often reflect upon a version of their own personal struggles. This again relates back to the idea that a diversity in superhero characters can help portray deeper societal meanings that we experience in the real-world. Like "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier," Kamala Khan is a character who shows heroism through the lens of someone who does not benefit from the patriarchy of America. Landis describes Kamala's character as one who uses her identity to differentiate herself from the hegemonic white standards of the past and continue to fight anyway.

Another article that reviews characters of color within the MCU and its comic book history is a [2020 dissertation](#) by Kayla Wilson. In this article, Wilson discusses the typical trope of positioning a Black sidekick within multiple Marvel partnerships and what this does for those Black character's stories and developments. Within just the introduction of the article, a central

point is made: the use of Black characters as a way to keep white characters positioned above them is only a way of continuing a narrative that normalizes racial hierarchy. Wilson essentially points out the fact that as audiences continuously see Black characters as only fulfilling the role of a sidekick to their white counterparts, the narrative that Black heroes are never *as* strong or *as* accomplished as white heroes continues to be normalized. Wilson also says these Black heroes are often portrayed in a way that promotes them being willing to give up their ideals and backgrounds in order to see their white, main character partners succeed and win. In the paper's section titled "Not *My* Captain America," Wilson analyzes this theory more deeply specifically through Sam Wilson's role in the Captain America movies. An interesting part of her analysis is the fact that Sam Wilson in the comic books has a very different background than Sam Wilson in the cinematic universe. The comics show the Falcon as a man who is a felon seeking to do good, and Captain America chooses to forgive him in his "white savior" character portrayal. Although some might think that the MCU showing the Falcon as a war veteran with brave and noble morals is a step away from the typical Black man criminal trope, Wilson critiques this because Sam Wilson is portrayed "like a refined white person" instead. The essay dives further into this idea when Wilson points out how many Marvel fans wanted the Captain America shield to be passed down to another white man rather than Sam Wilson. This speaks to the core question of whether America is ready to embrace a different Captain America. The essay also explores the theme of Black bodies being used to promote criminality and violence. The author argues that Sam Wilson's new role and title of Captain America does not change the fact that much of society will still view him as the sidekick; therefore, he will be operating under restraints because he is Black. Wilson says, "The idealistic America of Steve Rogers will always have a tether to the past and how things were. Sam's on the other hand was a reminder of where people should be

going, as they clearly had not left the racism behind.” However, perhaps having a Black man represent the title holds more symbolism and testament than it could under the face of a white man.

An important study on the topic of Black masculinity in the MCU is an [audience research study](#) done in 2020. This study was set up to track audience perception of diversity initiatives specifically within the MCU. The goal was to see whether announcing a commitment to diversity to replace Captain America would spark interest in the people tested or if the audience still wanted to see a white man playing the role. They sent out four rumors to Marvel and Disney fans in America to gauge the audience responses. One rumor said Sebastian Stan, a white man who plays Captain America’s best friend in the movies, would take the role of Captain America. The second rumor said Anthony Mackie, the Black man who plays The Falcon, would take the role of Captain America. The third rumor said Anthony Mackie would fulfill the Captain America role “for the sake of diversity.” The fourth rumor mentioned no specific actor but simply said the new Captain America would be influenced by a “diversity initiative” for casting. Essentially, the test wanted to figure out whether the audience cared about affirmative action and companies working towards diversity goals or if they only cared once these ideas were being implemented and acted on. It also aimed to see whether the audience liked the “cheap talk” with no mention of a specific actor or if the actor did matter in who replaced Captain America. Overall, the study found three main things. First, it found that an audience already being exposed to one diversity initiative would be more accepting and willing to watch more diversity initiatives take place. Second, it found that perhaps white Americans do make a distinction between diversity initiatives within the media and affirmative action motives within businesses, employment, and educational systems. Third, it found that the audience responded less favorably to a simple statement of

Marvel aiming for more diversity and was more motivated by the “Black Man Diversity” option where Anthony Mackie’s name was specifically stated and there was a clear initiative and action behind the rumor. This study is valuable because it gives actual studied audience research into the MCU and its attempts at expanding its diversity. By analyzing the perceptions of a white audience, the study gives valuable insight into how Marvel has been so successful because it is clearly aimed at a mainly white audience. However, the study also showed if diversity initiatives were normalized in the media, audiences would be more perceptive to them and want to see different types of characters on screen.

The discussion of race and diversity in the MCU has not been absent, especially in the last decade as the movies have seen an influx in popularity and demand. A 2021 article from the [Baltimore Sun](#), by David Zurawik, talks about “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier” and includes quotes from Anthony Mackie, the actor who plays Sam Wilson. A prominent quote from Mackie says, “Sam considers the shield a representation of the country that we live in. There’s a lot of trepidation as far as how does a Black man represent a country that does not represent him?” This is a timely theme the new television series explores through Sam Wilson’s character.

Most sources acknowledge that Wilson’s character as a Black man is often used as a messenger to address society’s issues of racial inequality. However, having a Black man who is not scared to show emotion and speak up towards law makers and government officials due to his privilege as a well-known superhero is an important figure for audiences to see. For Wilson, a shield representing who used to be Captain America, the blonde patriotic Steve Rogers, is a big undertaking to bestow upon himself as a Black man because he knows he will receive backlash and not everyone will understand why he wants to fight for a country that has inherently racist policies. We see this directly through the show’s character, Isaiah Bradley. Bradley is a Black

man who has been treated terribly by the government both during his time in WWII as a soldier and after the war with his wrongful imprisonment. This character is meant to represent the Black voices who seek justice for the inherent racism of America, and Wilson acknowledges that these people want more than just to sit idly by and hope for the best. This article also points out how as Wilson is grappling with whether or not to take on the shield, he has run-ins with the reality of being Black in America. Whether it is police asking for his ID without cause or the bank resisting giving his family a loan, the series ties in a lot of moments where racial microaggressions are thrown at Wilson.

For Marvel, these representations of a realistic experience for a Black American man is perhaps a slight step in the right direction compared to some of their past projects. Because the comic books were all written from a white, male perspective, the MCU is largely based on this inherently white point of view. For many audience members, the release of *Black Panther* was an exciting moment in the MCU because of its almost all Black cast and writing team. We also see T'Challa as another example of what Black masculinity can look like without the typical stereotypes of violence and drugs surrounding the character, similar to Sam Wilson. However, a 2020 scholarly article, by Rachel Alicia Griffin and Jonathon P. Rossing, titled, "*Black Panther* in widescreen: cross-disciplinary perspectives on a pioneering, paradoxical film," points out that these characters are still based on the white male perspective from the comic books. Wakanda itself was created by a white man, Lee, and therefore adheres to traditional Western values rather than African culture. Lee wanted to bring more racial diversity into the characters Marvel supplied. However, Black communities did not all agree with this because it was diversity coming from a white man's perspective and would also tokenize a certain type of Black character as being noble or a model Black man. The authors say Marvel's initial white comic book writers



now carry out an intrinsically white supremacist ideology within Marvel characters. It is made clear in the review that many Marvel writers were coming from a place of privilege and egotistical ways of thinking rather than approaching the idea of diversity by hiring diverse writers. Even if the MCU has gotten better at this throughout recent years in having a diverse group of creators for writing storylines of characters who are not white, many people have still argued characters like Sam are modeling a “token” Black man rather than a more realistic person. The article points out that the original Marvel comic books started being released during WWII to provide the comforting idea of superheroes in a world where Hitler was on the rise. This is how Captain America first came to be one of the comic’s most beloved characters. This again speaks to the idea that the original Captain America shield was written with a very American nationalist kind of way where the shield represented pride for the country.

Another useful review on this topic of Marvel and the way it is handling the idea of diversity and race is in a [2021 article for \*The Atlantic\*](#), by Sophie Gilbert. Gilbert brings up the fact that Captain America as Steve Rogers showed a very blatant loyalty and undying will to protect America at all costs which often brought into question the very idea of living by the American Dream ideals. As a white man, Rogers lived in privilege and did benefit from America’s governmental systems. However, Gilbert says we see Wilson taking on the role of Captain America for more personal, reflective reasons rather than patriotic reasons like the white Steve Rogers. “Sam’s ultimate decision, though, was based not on his clear-eyed analysis of what America is and has been, but on a more personal interrogation of how he might try to change it,” says Gilbert. The author then says that perhaps we see Wilson taking on the shield as a way to counteract this idealistic view of the American Dream. The article says, “Investigation even in the face of doubt: This seems to summarize why Sam takes on the loaded burden of Captain

America, a flag-wearing symbol of a country that has failed the better angels of its nature over and over again.” Gilbert makes the point that while Marvel, like America, has its obvious flaws, progress can only be mobilized when it is purposefully put out into the media landscape. “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier” series set out with a clear intention of addressing American racism at its core.

### **Methods**

For my own study analyzing specific moments Marvel showed us race playing into Sam Wilson’s storyline in “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier,” I watched the entire six-episode long series to collect information from as my sample. The first time through, I viewed it through a fresh lens with no expectations or spoilers going into it which allowed me to get a true first look into its themes and storylines. The second time through, I specifically chose scenes where Wilson addresses race or is faced with opposing pressure and pushback against his quest to become the next Captain America. Because I am specifically honing in on this one series and one particular character, the limit to my study is that I mainly studied one particular character’s story throughout the episodes. However, I am taking these scenes that show us Wilson’s intersectionality and identity as a Black American and placing them in comparison to the Black masculinity we see in *Black Panther*. I approached this study with a background knowledge of the MCU and a true interest in seeing how the writers chose to integrate Wilson’s role as Captain America in the storyline as a Black man in America. The Black Lives Matter movement America has seen a resurgence of in the last year also carried a heavy influence in the themes of this series, and Marvel clearly wanted the show to mirror these important themes within their fictional world.

There are a couple of extremely impactful scenes that help the audience understand the way Wilson's intersectionality makes his decision to take on the role of Captain America challenging. I will be analyzing them through a discourse analysis. There are two scenes where Wilson experiences racist microaggressions from white people that I will analyze as they give insight into what it is like to be Black in America. One scene features Wilson applying for a loan at his hometown bank to help his sister pay for family expenses, and the banker cannot give it to him because he is Black and has a five-year void on his credit. However, the banker has no problem asking Wilson for pictures. This scene shows us that Wilson's superhero status still does not surpass the fact that he is Black above all else. Another microaggression scene to analyze is that despite Steve Rogers passing down his shield to Wilson personally before his death, the American government took it from Wilson without advanced notice and gave it to another white man, anointing him the title of Captain America. This shows that even American leaders did not want a Black man to be Captain America. Another integral scene for my discourse analysis is a scene in episode four where Wilson finally meets the Black supersoldier, Isaiah Bradley. Bradley deeply resents America and its embedded racist beliefs while Wilson wants to speak out as a public figure for what America should be. The other important scene that reveals more intersectionality within the series is a scene in episode six where Wilson helps the police capture the show's main antagonist, Karli. Karli leads a terrorist group who are out for revenge on the government for misplacing immigrants. After capturing her, Wilson publicly speaks against the government and the reporters there to interview him. He calls them out for not taking action to protect everybody instead of marginalizing and oppressing entire groups of people. As a Black man, Wilson is speaking from a place of personal experience and informed knowledge of the American government. These scenes all help layer on the central theme of what being Black in

modern day America looks like and how the country needs systemic change to move beyond racism.

### **Findings**

By analyzing specific scenes that deal with race and the intersectionality of identifying as a male and as Black in “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier” and *Black Panther*, I have identified themes revolving around Black masculinity. Understanding emotions is okay and even welcomed into Black male stories, fighting through physical violence is not encouraged when the fight calls for empathy more than just aggression, and the intersectionality of this identity helps cater to the character’s ability to understand and listen to others. Both T’Challa and Sam Wilson undergo major self-discovery journeys that call on them to explore their emotions and their histories to better understand their present moments. This requires the men to move beyond the hegemonically masculine tropes of fighting out of anger or showing dominance through aggressive actions. These core themes will be further analyzed by deconstructing particular scenes that focus on these two main characters.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

An integral scene to Wilson’s character development in “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier” is a scene where Wilson speaks with the world’s first Black supersoldier, Isaiah Bradley. When Wilson arrives at Bradley’s house to talk, he is carrying the Captain America shield with him. Bradley says, “Those stars and stripes don’t mean nothing good to me,” and tells Wilson that every Black man in America understands why. Bradley served time during WWII for the U.S. Army, and he tells Wilson how disappointing and aggravating it was to spend years serving a country that burned crosses in his brothers’ backyard. Wilson says, “I’m from the south, I get that. But you were a supersoldier like Steve. You could’ve been the next --,” and then Bradley

interjects, ““The next what? Huh? Blonde hair, blue eyes stars and stripes? The entire world’s been chasing that great white hope since he first got injected with that serum.” Even within the first minute of their conversation, we see a clear division between these two Black male characters; one is bitter towards America for its racism and another is acknowledging the racism and tackling it. We hear more about Bradley’s past as he starts opening up. Bradley says,

“A handful of us got shot up with different versions of that serum, but they don’t tell us what it is. They tell us it’s tetanus. They sent us on missions, even though the others weren’t stable. Some of us started dying off. Then a couple of the boys get captured on a mission. I heard the brass talking about blowing the POW camp to hell, to hide the evidence, but those are my men, my brothers, not evidence. So I bust out of the facility one night and I brought the boys back. Not that it made a damn bit of difference. It wasn’t long before it was only me left, and what did I get for saving their lives? \*shows large branding on his torso\* For the next thirty years they experimented on me, trying to figure out why the serum worked.”

Bradley is emotional while telling his story. This scene shows two men having a face-to-face conversation about emotional, hard trials in their lives which opposes the hegemonically masculine lens for what men *should* talk about. Wilson intentionally went to Bradley’s house to discuss a topic he knew would be impassioned and difficult to digest. Their conversation also speaks to deeper levels of their intersectionality as Black American men. Bradley and other Black soldiers were experimented on with the super soldier serum while the white Steve Rogers got to live in hero-status and enjoy the benefits of the whole world idolizing him. Despite Bradley doing almost identical things

as a super soldier to what Rogers did, Bradley was selected as somehow less worthy of being praised for heroism.

Despite getting the same serum during his time serving in WWII as the white Steve Rogers, Bradley was used as a government test subject. This is similar to how we see Wilson being treated when the American government decides to give his shield away to another white, blonde-haired, blue-eyed man. The racism is made clear in these acts.

Despite the hard topic they talk about, the scene is a beautiful, vulnerable display of what it can look like for two men to sit down and talk about their emotions with one another. Neither one of them is worried about showing emotion in front of the other one, and they both challenge each other to view their shared issues in different ways. For this reason, this scene also plays into a larger theme identified above; the intersectionality Sam Wilson help him have a greater empathy for what other people are experiencing within oppressive government systems. Bradley is perhaps able to be so open with Wilson because of their shared struggle as Black men in America. They have an unspoken empathy for one another.

We see intersectionality playing an integral role in empathy with characters in *Black Panther*, too. In one of the film's final scenes, T'Challa takes the defeated villain, KillMonger, up to a cliff to watch the infamous Wakanda sunset. As KillMonger takes some of his last breaths, the scene stands as a metaphor for a deeper level of understanding the two juxtaposed characters hold for one another. KillMonger sees the world as an oppressive place where Black people need all the help they can get in order to fight back with force. He knows Wakanda has the perfect resources to do this with. T'Challa believes Wakanda's resources will give power-hungry people too much power and wants to keep the borders closed. Despite these differences in perspective, the two characters do understand each other deep down because they

have experienced similar struggles within their lifetimes. T'Challa still holds remorse and empathy for what Killmonger wanted to do in trying to help his people, and Killmonger still respects T'Challa for trying to navigate his leadership as the new king of Wakanda. The sunset moment visually shows the two characters uniting over the picturesque backdrop of Wakanda and both their ideas coming to an end.

### **To Fight or to Empathize**

Another main theme discovered in my content analysis was the idea that male respect does not need to come from hapless fighting and violence. However, this theme is a bit juxtaposed between *Black Panther* and “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier.” While they both give us male leads who are conscious of the primitiveness of fighting and how it is not always the only answer to a problem, T'Challa perhaps is more respected by others because of his combat skills as the Black Panther. Wilson is skilled in combat, and people do respect him for his time protecting the country, but he is not always respected because of that. This awareness of the superficiality of fighting shows that these two media are moving away from a hegemonically masculine ideology and perpetuating a masculinity that says having emotional intelligence and empathy are also ways a man can earn respect from others.

In the finale episode of “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier,” Wilson delivers a very impactful speech. The overarching message he wants to convey to the government officials around him is that suppressing a group of people in a systematic way will only lead them to take action towards freeing themselves. When the general population started reappearing after the Avengers reversed the infamous Thanos snap in *Avengers: Endgame* some came back to no home or job. This left many people in a refugee state. Throughout this series, we see the main villain, Karli, organizing a group of people to fight against big governments for not helping

people like her find new homes and security after the snap. This group, the “Flag Smashers,” also takes the super soldier serum to gain impressive physical endurance and strength.

When Wilson finally corners Karli and she is killed against his best intentions, he brings her body to the police. Reporters buzz around him, and Wilson is thanked by the senators for his combat skills. However, this does not sit right with him. He says, “You have to stop calling them terrorists,” and the male senator asks back, “What else would we call them?” Wilson then replies that government “peace-keeping” troops are only going to bring in scary weapons to create fear for displaced people like Karli as a solution. When the senator then tries to push Wilson’s argument aside by telling him he does not understand how “complicated” the situation is, Wilson says,

“I’m a Black man carrying the stars and stripes. What don’t I understand? Every time I pick this thing up, I know there are millions of people out there who are gonna hate me for it. Even now, here, I feel it: the stares, the judgement. And there’s nothing I can do to change it. Yet I’m still here. No superserum, no blonde hair or blue eyes. The only power I have is that I believe we can do better. We can’t demand that people step up and we don’t meet them halfway... But the question is: who’s in a room with you when you’re making those decisions? Is it the people you’re going to impact, or is it just more people like you? I mean this girl died trying to stop you, and no one has stopped for one second to ask why. You’ve gotta do better, senator. You've gotta step up, because if you don’t, the next Karli will.”

This call-to-action moment is an example of how Wilson is using his intersectionality as a Black man who also benefits from the privilege of being an Avenger to stick up for



bigger problems. He boldly calls out the government for not working harder at fixing the root of the problem and just prolonging it with insufficient solutions. The senator is willing to listen to him because Wilson has earned intellectual respect and trust through his work for the country. We also saw throughout the series that Wilson did not want to kill Karli, and he tells her he understands why she is fighting and why she is upset. Wilson empathizes with the villain because he constantly gets treated differently for being Black in America every day. His identity ultimately allows him the room to empathize with a person the government simply wrote off as a “terrorist” without trying to understand or help her cause.

The characteristics of T’Challa are similar to this in some respects. He wants to better understand why Wakanda should open up its borders and share its resources with the rest of the world, and he does this by asking the people he trusts what their opinions are. This shows that he puts a lot of trust and respect into the people surrounding him in his decisions as a leader, especially the women around him. For example, he asks Nakia, his girlfriend who works as a War Dog outside of Wakanda, how she suggests the kingdom move forward with sharing its resources. She tells him she believes Wakanda could help many people escape poverty and find more opportunities. However, T’Challa also fights to claim superiority over others. While we see Wilson fighting only when absolutely necessary to protect someone, T’Challa strongly believes in upholding these more violent, aggressive Wakandan traditions as the Black Panther. He is forced to fight for his spot on the throne and the protection of the greater good of Wakanda at the end of the film, but the Wakandan traditions in general perpetuate hegemonically masculine ideas. T’Challa also lives in an all-Black society where he does not face racist systems, so

he does not have the same experience with his identity as a Black man as Sam Wilson does.

### **Analysis**

After applying a content analysis to my thesis, it is clear that Black male masculinity is portrayed in both sources of media in similar ways when considering hegemonic masculinity. We have Black male characters who show a very strong connection with their emotions, and both Sam Wilson and T'Challa prioritize the need to contemplate their options intellectually and emotionally before acting on them. This ability to be tender with others and show a deep compassion and empathy for others is what places these two media products as more progressive. While Marvel comics in general uphold a very white, male lens on what a superhero can do and who a superhero is, these two Black characters are redefining the old comic books. This is a step in the right direction. T'Challa and Sam Wilson show that manliness does not simply mean respect is earned by aggression and dominance but that manliness can mean empathy, sadness, and love.

Despite this progressive side of these two media products, there is still a baseline argument to be made about how diverse the MCU can truly become. Marvel comic books first started to be released in the late 1930's and were written by a white man named Stan Lee. Due to Lee's ethnicity as a caucasian man, many scholars argue that the comic books are not truly that diverse despite featuring a select few non-white characters as heroes. To further this discussion of superhero diversity, the Marvel movies are heavily based around the comic book storylines and heroes to appease hardcore comic fans. This is troublesome when considering diversity and inclusion of Black superheroes like T'Challa and the Falcon. If the movies still revolve around these Black superheroes who were initially created by a white author, how diverse are the stories

themselves? There is an argument to be made for the more modern Marvel movies being released as films like *Black Panther* were written and produced by largely Black teams, but this still does not solve the core issue of the Black Panther being created by white men. Not only this, but Wakanda itself, the thriving, technologically advanced African country was also formed by the minds of white men which sets it to rely heavily on Western values.

There is also the issue of the Black sidekick trope which we see Sam Wilson fulfilling in every Marvel movie up until the release of “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier.” Wilson is the faithful, trustworthy sidekick to the white Captain America. While the movies do give Wilson a small amount of screen time for the audience to learn he is a veteran and has combat skills, that is about the extent of his character development. The only piece of information we have about Wilson is that he is loyal to those he cares about, but that is not anything abnormal for a superhero created under a white gaze. The new Disney+ series enables Wilson to finally transcend this sidekick role and get his spotlight. We see his personality through clips of him with his sister and nephews, with his relationship with the Winter Soldier, Bucky Barnes (Steve Rogers’s other best friend), and through his bravery to stand up to the government to address social change. Now we see Wilson as more than just loyal, and his identity is not solely defined by his relationship with a white man.

As the MCU continues to move forward with future films, it appears it will continue this ongoing battle between being pulled back by old gender tropes and racial inequalities and creating space for new writing teams with more voices, perspectives, and characters to introduce to the realm of superheroes. By leaving behind many traits of toxic masculinity in Sam Wilson and T’Challa and not allowing these Black men to be defined by white men or to be trapped inside racial stereotypes, Marvel is obviously pushing against past media tropes. More change is

needed in the future to create a media landscape where these character tropes regarding race and gender do not exist in such a toxic way, but it is evident that the MCU is slowly making active choices to be inclusive and show characters from different backgrounds on screen. We are starting to see more superheroes of color both in recent comic books and recent Marvel films which helps enhance representation in one of the mainstream white media's most popular areas of entertainment. Superheroes do not have to be only limited to white people or a white audience, but changing what was written in the comic books would perhaps call for completely new superheroes to be created in Marvel's future.

### **Conclusion**

The question of diversity in a white-created science fiction world remains to be truly fulfilled or answered. Marvel has made recent strides to counteract toxic and limiting gender tropes society has normalized. Newer films for the company have included male lead characters who are not tied down by the physicality of fighting and proving their "manliness" through dominance. Instead of this, we get characters like T'Challa and Sam Wilson who want people to respect them for their intellect and virtuosity as leaders in their societies. They both surpass the hyper masculine Black male trope.

Wakanda is a place that values its traditions and cultural background, and it uses these practices as leadership guidelines. T'Challa both adheres to a more traditional way of thinking while also not shying away from taking advice from others around him. The Black women he confides in are independent and smart, and he takes their advice seriously rather than throwing it under the rug and acting like his masculine point of view is superior. We see masculine arrogance being pushed aside in his character which is an integral step in the right direction if the media are to stop continuing the spread of toxic masculinity within society. The media is in fact a direct

reflection on what society is, and its reflection gets regurgitated back out into the world to help perpetuate and hyperbolize these stereotypes in the real world.

With Sam Wilson, we are thrown right into his struggle as a Black man in America from the beginning of “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier.” He does not profit off a privileged standing in this society like T’Challa does in Wakanda because regardless of his superhero status, much of America still sees him as Black first. As discussed in a deeper content analysis, Wilson uses what status and respect he does have from his loyalty to the country in his past to call out government programs who are not doing enough. He understands what oppression looks like as he receives microaggressions every day, and he is unafraid to tell the U.S. government it needs to do more to help groups who are oppressed rather than giving these people negative labels and pushing them aside with “peace-keeping” troops. The series shows Wilson profiting from his superhero status because it has earned him some respect from government officials; however, we also see scenes where Wilson is treated unequally because he is a Black man. Even within the first episode, there is a scene in which Wilson tries to help his sister, Sarah, apply for a business loan. The white male banker racially profiles Wilson in asking him if he played football. When the banker does find out that Wilson is the Falcon, he gets more friendly and wants a selfie with him. Despite this, he still finds excuses to refuse a loan to the siblings. Wilson helps us see the ugly juxtapositions of the American government's systemically racist systems in full through his character's intersectional identity. On top of this, Wilson is a strong good example of a male character who is not defined by stereotypically masculine ways of thinking because he values empathy, emotions, and intelligence.

The MCU is far from being completely diverse or removed from gender tropes in its characters, and *Black Panther* and “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier” are not rid of them

either. However, initiating change in the media has to start somewhere, and these recent Marvel pieces are helping create space for a new type of masculine superhero. Intersectionality in characters like Sam Wilson help audiences feel more empowered and represented. Emotions can be manly and Black people can be heroic, too.

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