

Captain (Asian) America:
The Importance of Inclusivity in Comic Book Movies

I've recently been able to better articulate my feelings of representation through diversity and inclusion in comic book films. I will do so here, and hopefully it will be a little enlightening, prefaced with a "Too Long; Didn't Read."

TL;DR:

1. Diversity and Inclusivity (with specific respect to storytelling) are not the same thing. Diversity is about promoting the accurate representation of one's cultural background in an honest way. Inclusivity is (or in my opinion should be) about allowing POC to inhabit spaces and stories without forcing them to be defined by their race. Or in other words: don't relegate POC to the "other" category. Diversity is celebrating what makes us different. Inclusivity is celebrating what makes us the same.
2. Representation (both diversity and inclusion) in stories is just as (if not more) important for young white readers as it is for POC youth to experience.

Okay, the long take:

1. Inclusivity in Film

While stories about diversity are fun, amazing, and can allow readers to enter a world that may resonate from familiarity for one while expanding another's world perspective, they are not a substitute for inclusivity. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is a good place to start. Black Panther is a good example of introducing a diverse story into their universe. However, as I see it, inclusivity at the casting level is about affording the same opportunities to POC for roles that are not race-specific. Again, the MCU has adhered to this principle on many occasions. Idris Elba and Tessa Thompson play Norse Gods Heimdall and Valkyrie and their race is never mentioned in the films, nor does it define their characters. The same is true for Zendaya's portrayal of MJ and Tony Revolori as Flash Thompson in the spider-man films from Sony. These actors get to play the part because the casting directors recognized that they were the most capable of embodying those characters' traits. Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 is the most diverse cast in the MCU to date, with multiple POC in lead roles, not once mentioning race. This is the embodiment of inclusivity at a casting level. Find the best actor for the role, regardless of race. In that way, GotG Vol. 2 is a monumental superhero film with the caveat that it may have been an easier sell considering none of them play humans of earth. As mentioned above, the MCU has bent the race of multiple supporting characters in their films with great success. However, they have yet to do so with a leading role. This is the next great step forward for inclusivity.

I believe the most poignant property to take this next astonishing leap forward for inclusivity in film is the X-men. At its core, the X-men franchise has historically been about acceptance, representation, and civil and human rights. What better property, then, is there to show to the world that POC are also allowed to become the heroes we all know and love? While there is an immense feeling of

fulfillment from being represented through diversity, the ultimate goal of inclusivity is to live in an integrated world. This starts at an entertainment level, where people absorb stories as informative cultural cues. Often times, I am asked by well meaning white Americans “Don’t you want to be represented?” To which I reply “I’m not waiting around for a 50% Sri-Lankan 50% Scandinavian superhero in order to feel represented. I want to be Captain America.” If you are interested in learning more about this perspective of representation from POC, I would highly recommend Trevor Noah’s autobiography, *Born a Crime*. In it, he discusses what it meant to grow up biracial, never truly fitting in to any one culture. Additionally, he speaks to how his mother never taught him to let his perception of his own race put limitations on his aspirations. This is a key point for POC that is all too often missed specifically in the Comic Book Movie. We are more than our race, we are people too. We are accountants, we are engineers, we read comics, we watch movies, mow lawns, play board games, and drive cars. To further drive this home, look no further than 2018’s *Into the Spideverse*. While stories like that of a Muslim Ms. Marvel are great examples of humanizing POC experiences defined by race for a wide audience, movies like *Into the Spideverse* capture the essence of the Spider-man lore without allowing Miles Morales’s race to add burden to the character’s development. That is not to say that his race does not inform key aspects of the film’s design, but rather that it is not the *defining* trait of the character. Bringing it back to X-men and the MCU, there is no better property and opportunity for Disney and Marvel Studios to boldly take the next step forward for POC representation through inclusivity. This can and should be done through focusing attention at the casting level. For a film about a civil rights comic book series, all actors should be afforded the opportunity to play their dream roles without being restricted by the color of their skin. An open casting with regards to race for *leading roles* such as Professor X, Mystique, Wolverine, Jean Grey, and Scott Summers would be a monumental moment in comic book movie history.

2. The Audience (It’s not just for us)

You still with me? Wow, it’s been a wild ride. And you may ask yourself “Well, why is this so important?” And you may ask yourself “Isn’t representation for POC to feel represented?” *And you may find yourself... in a beautiful house.* (Just had to slip in a *Talking Heads* reference for good measure). Well, here’s the thing. For me, as a POC, representation is not just for me. I’m willing to admit it: halfway through *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* I lost focus and choked up a bit in the theater realizing that seeing Riz Ahmed in freakin’ Star Wars was the closest I’d ever gotten to seeing someone that looked even remotely like me in freakin’ Star Wars. That said, much like Trevor Noah’s mother as mentioned above, my mother never let me see that race could define my character: WHO I am is not WHAT I am. To me, in that theater watching *Rogue One*, I really realized for the first time the power of fantasy. Here was a POC, hell multiple POC, existing in *freakin’* Star Wars, never once bringing up the color of their skin. They just seamlessly existed in that space. But I’m going to throw a wrench in the whole thing now and attempt to give you a new perspective on it all. As important as it was for me to feel represented in that moment, it was 10 times more important for all the white people in the audience to see someone like me existing as a lead character in FREAKIN’ Star Wars. Again, WHO I am is not WHAT I am. This idea is directly reflected by the characters I choose to look up to, the ones I aspire to be like. As a child, *Batman: The Animated Series* introduced me to the streets of Gotham. A couple years later, *FX’s DVD on TV* series showed me *X-men*. Later still, I’d eagerly await summer vacation to catch up on rerun episodes of *Teen Titans* and *X-men: Evolution*. These superhero shows and their characters informed me of the

person I would become. I wanted to be a master problem solver like Batman, a strong leader like Robin, a thoughtful counselor like Professor X. Countless hours were spent in the backyard pretending to be those heroes. As a seven year old boy with an unlimited imagination, NOT ONCE did I ever bring a play session to a grinding halt to ask myself "Am I allowed to be Wolverine? I'm not white, maybe I should be pretending to be a brown character instead. Can someone tell me which X-men is Sri-Lankan? And also a little Norwegian... and Swedish too. Sorry, I'm complicated." No, I was far too busy determining how my brother pretending to be (white) Sabertooth was going to launch me through the air via leg press maneuvers! Believing I could be these heroes is what encouraged me to believe I belonged with everyone else. If all the superheroes were brown like me, what if everyone else believed they belonged with me? Finally, I grew up. And it did hit me: regardless of my own perceptions of race, others' perceptions of race are real too. I can pretend all day that my race doesn't define me, and to me it truly does not. But the harsh reality is that I must be ready to *deal* with others' definitions of me when they are presented. I have had the cops called on me in front of a cafe at 3 PM on a sunny afternoon because I was taking a phone call for 40 minutes while walking around my car (to obviously enjoy the nice weather). I have had to explain to a cafe owner that his employee called the cops on me and had to listen to his flimsy response that implicated I may have looked homeless to his "concerned" employees. I have lost my footing in college entry interviews as the interviewers jokingly opened with "ice breakers" around their own cognitive dissonance created by my white name and brown skin. I have been mistaken for a foreign exchange student 6 miles away from the hospital in which I was born... IN IDAHO.

The truth is, there is no character exactly like me. Unless I write one myself, there likely never will be. I want white people to be able to see themselves in characters that look like me the way I've been seeing myself in characters that look like them for the last 25 years. Sadly, I think one of the truths of being a POC is that well-meaning white folks misunderstand the issue of representation from the perspective of an actual POC. I've spent my whole life feeling represented through the character traits of *white* characters. I aspire to be driven and disciplined like White Batman. I want to live with the steadfast integrity of White Captain America. I want to do the right thing even when it's not the easy thing like White Spider-man. In my head and in my heart, when I'm reading comics or watching movies, *I AM THOSE CHARACTERS*. How important can you imagine it is, then, for young white Americans to be able to look up to Heroes of Color as relatable role models? This starts with entertainment. This starts with inclusivity. This starts with open-casting of historically white comic book characters. It never ends, it never will. But every day, we'll see a little more of ourselves in each other. It is simply false to believe that representation is solely a deliverable for POC audiences, and quite frankly comes off a little bit like a Rudyard Kipling poem if you know what I mean. "Oh, we're doing this great thing for you so that you can have a hero too!" We've always had heroes, the same heroes as you. Representation informs and educates white audiences, proving through the power of storytelling that *we* don't just have to exist in *their* world... we can make this *our* world. We can make this a world for everyone.

P.S. In writing this section, I reminded myself of a striking image I once saw several years ago of *Sikh Captain America*, a cosplay version of Captain America wearing a turban with the iconic "A" from Cap's helmet on the front. Vishavjit Singh, a cartoonist depicting some of the topics discussed in this section was that captain. For the first time since I was playing *X-men* in the backyard as a

child, I really believe that seeing that image was the moment a seed re-blossomed in my mind:
“What’s truly stopping someone like me from playing Steve Rogers, Bruce Wayne, Wolverine, or Peter Parker in a movie someday? What if someday was *today*?” We see ourselves in heroes that look like you. I hope you can see yourself in heroes that look like me.

-Joe (Captain America... someday)