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Inverting Racial Stereotypes in *Black Panther*

Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* explores the complexity in themes of racial identity, power dynamics, and the impacts of colonialism. Professor Richard Dyer discusses similar ideas in *The Matter of Whiteness*, with a focus on differentiating perceptions of whiteness from those of other races. Dyer states that "as long as race is something only applied to non-white people, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people" (1). *Black Panther* introduces powerful African nation Wakanda, obscured from the rest of the world to protect its valuable resources. Near the end of the film, Wakandan doctor Nakia rescues United States CIA Agent Everett Ross from a grave injury by bringing him to Wakanda to treat his wound with advanced medical technology. The scene in which Nakia introduces Everett to Wakanda is crucial in showing a direct comparison between Black and white characters. The staging and cinematography position Everett as an outsider, contrasting with the ignorant arrogance indicated by his dialogue and actions. Coogler exemplifies Dyer's conceptualization of race through inverting the roles of Black and white characters and comparing their reactions.

Black characters in media often fall into common stereotypes and solely serve to support or inhibit white main characters. In this scene, Coogler flips the narrative, showing an environment where a powerful Black woman, Nakia, represents the norm while a white US government official, Everett, becomes the outsider. Coogler quickly establishes this relationship with the

introduction of each character. The audience first sees a close-up of Nakia's hands expertly navigating a collection of advanced technology, showing evident precision and skill. In contrast, the film first pictures Everett lying on the hospital bed, appearing dazed and confused. The angle from above gives the impression that the viewer looks down at him, and the intentional use of cinematography continues this dynamic throughout the scene. The camera repeatedly circles Everett to emphasize his confusion, while simultaneously showcasing Nakia's extensive technology surrounding him in the background. The moving camera creates a sense of unsteadiness and disorientation. Nakia, on the other hand, is primarily captured through still shots with a static camera, implying that she belongs comfortably in the professional environment.

The staging also contributes to the contrast between the two characters. Throughout the scene, Everett wears a loose medical gown, serving as a constant reminder that Nakia saved him. The unusual black color of the gown, contrary to the pale blue or white generally seen in US hospitals, makes him appear out of place in his environment. The patterns in the fabric also mirror the technology in the background, continuing the emphasis on Wakanda's advanced technological resources. Everett's clothes blend into the background, while Nakia immediately stands out in a vibrant orange dress. Her confident stance and bold clothes symbolize her comfort and center her as the main character in this environment, while Everett's staging indicates his role as a lesser character, typically played by minority actors.

Agent Ross, who grew up and works in the US, embodies Dyer's idea of whiteness as an inherent lack of race. When Nakia addresses Everett as "colonizer," he replies, "What? My name is Everett" (Coogler). Everett does not recognize himself as holding an internal racial identity and therefore cannot comprehend being externally perceived through a racial lens. He sees

himself as “just Everett,” or “just a person,” as Dyer states. In other words, being white is equated with being human, while Black characters’ race serves as a central aspect of their identity and their worldview, as Nakia demonstrates. Everett's dialogue represents the wider Western world’s perspective on race, and his out of place position in Wakanda emphasizes the irony in his words compared with his lack of power in this scene.

Black Panther presents a powerful African nation rarely depicted in media and uses Everett’s character to represent the larger Western world. Through removing Everett from an environment where he is in control, Coogler exhibits Dyer’s concept of race and whiteness. Throughout the film, Everett exercises a level of power associated with his race and position of power as a C.I.A. agent. When Nakia directly confronts him with ideas of race, specifically colonization, he immediately separates himself from these identities. Everett represents a wider willful blindness to race and colonial history. His career further complicates the narrative; the C.I.A. parallels colonialism through the way the Western world exercises its power in foreign countries.

Works Cited

Coogler, Ryan. *Black Panther*. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018.

Dyer, Richard. *The Matter of Whiteness*. Routledge, 1997.