

HYPERALLERGIC

OPINION

What *Black Panther* Gets Right About the Politics of Museums

In one scene, the blockbuster superhero movie touches on issues of provenance, repatriation, diversity, representation, and other debates currently shaping institutional practices.

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The “Museum of Great Britain” scene from Black Panther (2018) (courtesy Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures)

While everything about Marvel Comics’ record-breaking *Black Panther* is wonderfully extraordinary, for museum folks the standout scene may be Erik Killmonger’s visit to the fictitious “Museum of Great Britain.” In the span of a few minutes, viewers witness the condescending treatment of a museum visitor of color, a discussion of questionable acquisition practices, and the self-assured yet misinformed retelling of cultural narratives. The scene also makes a number of subtler, equally poignant points. Though the High Museum in Atlanta served as the museum’s exterior, the Museum of Great Britain seems to be a thinly fictionalized version of the British Museum, which has long been embroiled in a number of real-life repatriation campaigns. And Killmonger’s partner and henchwoman, inconspicuously disguised as a café worker, reflects the hierarchical divisions that persist even when museums’ workforces are ostensibly “diverse” — with predominantly white curatorial staff and people of color in service roles. The scene,

which may prompt viewers to think about their own museum visits (or lack thereof), is also emblematic of the experiences of many people of color in such spaces.

Even the Former First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, is familiar with the sense of exclusion that awaits many people of color in museums. During her 2015 speech at the opening of the Whitney Museum's new building, she described how children living less than a mile away might not imagine themselves ever visiting a museum. "I was one of those kids myself," Obama said. "So I know that feeling of not belonging in a place like this."

However, *Black Panther* demonstrates that the "feeling of not belonging" is part of a larger picture, one that includes racism and reckless cultural appropriation. The controversy surrounding Dana Schutz's painting, "Open Casket" (2016), is a case in point. While some found merit in the stylized depiction of Emmett Till's corpse, others demanded the painting's removal from the 2017 Whitney Biennial. But as writer Siddhartha Mitter recently reflected, for all the complex issues raised by the controversy, the heated debates mostly revolved around one question: Who gets to tell whose story? *Black Panther* pushes the question even further: how does it feel when someone else tells your story? Killmonger knows the feeling, and offers one kind of solution.



At the Whitney, a protest against Dana Schutz' painting of Emmett Till: "She has nothing to say to the Black community about Black trauma."

As a gallery director who is also black, I was awed by Killmonger's declaration to an overconfident curator that she was mistaken. When the curator condescendingly informed Killmonger that items in the museum aren't for sale, my hands began to sweat. And I was downright thrilled when the villain bluntly confronted her: "How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it like they took everything else?"

As artist Deborah Roberts told me: "*Black Panther's* museum scene describes a centuries-old truth — colonialists robbing black culture to put on display for European consumption." This taking of stories — the theft Roberts speaks of — is only part of the not-belonging feeling Michelle Obama described. Moreover, it isn't just about who gets to tell the stories; it's also about who gets to *hear* the stories.

For Killmonger to educate the curator and reshape his story, he had to go to the museum. But data show black museum visitors are rare, making up just 6% of overall visitors to US museums, according to a 2010 report by the American Alliance of Museums. This could be a result of uncomfortable visitor experiences, it could be because the narratives elevated in galleries aren't representative, or a combination of these and other factors. Regardless, to Roberts's point, even when attention is given to under-represented stories, the narratives aren't always shared with those reflected in the stories. It's not simply about touting marginalized stories; it's also about creating access to them — for everyone.

In galleries devoted to exploring under-represented voices at the University of Texas at Austin, where I work, special attention is paid to who visits — because access to a broad range of visitors reveals the interconnectedness of stories. On a predominantly white campus, where black students comprise just 3.9% of the student population, a visitor once asked me why the gallery wasn't located in an area with more African-Americans, "where the subject matter is relevant to the visitors." But imagine how far we would (or wouldn't) get if the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture were situated so as to only be easily accessible for African-Americans. Access creates opportunities for discovery, so that we may recognize our roles in others' narratives.

To be clear, museums and other cultural spaces have functioned under the weight of these truths since people began publicly exhibiting art and artifacts. But old truths are giving way to new attitudes, as evidenced by France's more diplomatic version of

Killmonger's vigilante repatriation of African artifacts. However, ongoing debates about representation, repatriation, and cultural appropriation — all cannily encapsulated in Killmonger's memorable visit to the Museum of Great Britain in *Black Panther* — affirm that a great deal of work is still needed to make our museums truly welcoming and diverse. Besides, as Princess Shuri puts it: "Just because something works doesn't mean it can't be improved."

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