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More than a Superhero Movie: In Wakanda Forever Course, Students Unpack Marvel's 'Black Panther'

In a spring semester American studies course, students watch "Black Panther," studying the racial context and implications of the groundbreaking film



February 22, 2019 | Kindell Brown and Julia Rubin

BRISTOL, R.I. – Roger Williams University Assistant Professor of American Studies Aaron C. Allen clearly remembers when *Black Panther* came to theaters last February and he went to go see it with a group of friends.

"I went with some folks who aren't into comic book movies at all, had never seen any other movie in the MC (Marvel Comics) universe," he said. "So I knew that it was doing real cultural work."

The film, which centers around the fictional African nation of Wakanda, is not just an entertaining superhero movie but also an invaluable opportunity for discussing the politics of race and racism in the United States and beyond. Allen decided to bring this discussion to campus this semester when he launched the course, "Wakanda Forever: The Racial Politics in Marvel's 'Black Panther.' "

"Wakanda Forever: The Racial Politics in Marvel's 'Black Panther' "



RWU students are excited to be participating in Allen's class, not just to watch the film with their classmates, but to view it with more cultural context.

"[Course readings about] Afrofuturism, Pan-Africanism, and Afrocentrism, have especially helped me to understand more of the elements that were put in to this movie – all of those little things that can go over your head if you're not clued in to it," said senior psychology major Haley Andersson. "Before starting this class, I knew that *Black Panther* was doing important things, but now I feel like I have a better idea of specifically how."

The new course encourages students to analyze this piece of pop culture with a critical eye, through the lens of power, oppression, and resistance.

"The film itself is raising real questions about power and equity," said Allen. "For example, the character of Erik Killmonger, is an African American who has been disavowed from his home country but realizes that Wakanda's technology can liberate all black people around the world."

Students are learning that it's not only the plotline of the film that sparks dialogue, but also who was involved in its creation.

"Circulating the film is the power of an all-black cast in the production phase – the major players being black themselves, so having a little bit more creative control about some of the topics they want to tackle in a way that they have agency to do," Allen said.

Allen is bringing all these issues into the discussion with his students, encouraging them to think beyond the idea of representation and into the intricacies of the film's impact on society.

Senior finance major Anthony Holehouse says he took this class because he has always been interested in social justice, systematic structures, and culture. His first assignment was to write a review which discussed the ways these themes are explored in the film.

"It gave me a new perspective on how this film paved the way for African American actors and represented Hip Hop, African culture, and African American culture in such an amazing way," said Holehouse. "It was a piece of work that was meant to educate, empower, and give people like myself a new way to view themselves."

This critical analysis of popular culture and everyday media consumption is one of the major undertakings of the American Studies Department at RWU and is already having a profound impact on Allen's students. The course is giving students the tools to unpack what they see in films like *Black Panther*, so that they can continue to develop a critical eye both in and outside the classroom.

"The media we consume defines who we are, regardless of whether or not we're aware of it," said senior American studies major Emily Craig. "To understand ourselves, and the policies and structures we put in place, we must understand and see our media through a more complex lens."

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