If You're (Concerned About) White You're Alt-Right: Racialized Conservative Responses to *Black Panther*

by

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The critical acclaim and box office success of the Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole film *Black Panther*, a paean to African Nationalism and Black Power if ever there was one, has caused lots of conservatives and especially the alt-right to lose their minds.[1] Or, to be more accurate, it has helped an ongoing process of a perpetually outraged sector of society to reveal just how unhinged it is. A large swath of the right's responses to *Black Panther* and, perhaps more pointedly, to the film's successes fall into three categories of white supremacist grief and rationalization: 1) trolling; 2) bar-raising and goalpost shifting; and, 3) co-optation. As we shall see, these silly arguments reek of desperation and reveal the tangled arguments of white supremacy's self-justification. This reflection will briefly attempt to untangle this rhetorical and ahistorical mess. It goes without saying, #NotAllConservatives, but #EnoughToMatter.

The First Stage of Alt-Right Grief: Trolling and Fake Merit

It would have been sad had it not been so pathetic.

Even before *Black Panther* had appeared nationally in theaters on February 16, 2018—that is to say, even before virtually anyone had seen it—stories began to appear about a bizarre phenomenon. Alt-right trolls, possibly the spawn of the legendarily misogynistic and racist online community known as "Gamergate," had put together a coordinated effort to torpedo *Black Panther*'s "Rotten Tomatoes" audience scores.[2] Two weeks before the movie appeared on screens across the United States and the world, it had broken all sorts of pre-sale records and was the number one daily ticket seller on Fandango. An organization with a Facebook page, "Down with Disney's Treatment of Franchises and Its Fanboys," which self-identified with the alt-right, wanted people to flood the movie's Rotten Tomatoes page with negative reviews of a film that none of them had yet seen.[3]

The group had successfully attacked the acclaimed blockbuster *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* in December 2018, lowering its ratings beyond all proportion based on critical responses and various other measures of fan engagement. And while the alt-right organization initially claimed that it was concerned with the treatment of various franchises and with the alleged (and utterly unsubstantiated) paying off of critics, it did not take long before members of the organization admitted their real concerns were about the elevated role of female and black characters in the movies they targeted.[4]

Facebook and Rotten Tomatoes quickly shut down the alt-right effort to coordinate an attack on *Black Panther's* fan ratings before it could make many inroads. The same cannot be said for the movie's IMDB ratings, however, which did plummet due to similar alt-right efforts.[5]

What is most pernicious and disingenuous about these efforts is that they represent trolling efforts to game a crowd-sourced system that exists to achieve some sense of wisdom-of-the-crowds merit. In other words, flawed though they may be, these sorts of assessments are supposed to give moviegoers a sense of how their peers reacted to a movie. These alt-right efforts are therefore attempts to stuff the ballot box on movies they have not seen on purely ideological grounds almost universally based upon sexism, racism, and other forms of ethnocentrism.[6] Similarly, some alt-right trolls posted pictures depicting alleged black attacks on white *Black Panther* attendees. None of these pictures contained even a vague scintilla of truth, instead coming from images from video games or completely different contexts. As the title of one story on the alt-right responses to the movie suggests, *Black Panther* is "loved by the world, hated by trolls."[7]

The Second Stage of Alt-Right Grief: Denial, Bar-raising, and Goalpost Shifting

Dear reader, did you know that Wakanda does not exist? Are you aware that Wakanda is not a real country in a real place in the modern world of 2018? I knew that. I suspect you did, too. And yet the fact that Wakanda, a country drawn from Marvel's vast comic book universe, does not exist became a talking point among mainstream conservatives and the alt-right alike.[8]

Here is a list of other places that do not exist: Narnia, Hogwarts, Oz (including the Emerald City), Middle Earth, West Egg (which is, of course, jealous of East Egg which also does not exist), Westeros, Asgard, Gotham, and every place in *Star Wars* that I am not about to look up. Superman is from Krypton.

I have never heard anyone say, "Krypton does not exist." *Star Trek* has a whole geography surrounding it. My understanding is that there is no deep debate about whether those places exist. Potterville? Green Acres? Mayberry? Cabot Cove? Pawnee? Sesame Street? None of these places actually exists. None has had to defend themselves against their non-existence as has *Black Panther's* Wakanda. One need not be a race relations theorist to ascertain why this is so.

The "Wakanda is not real" hubbub emerged in February 2018, once again before the film *Black Panther* had been released. On February 10 *The New York Times* published an article, "'Black Panther' Brings Hope, Hype, and Pride."[9] Throughout, the article engages with the aspirational aspect of the fictional Wakanda and the meanings it held symbolically for many Black Americans. In response, conservative columnist Ben Shapiro tweeted, "Wakanda does not exist," a rejoinder apropos of nothing but freighted with intended meaning. Shapiro followed up with what could only be considered a rant on *The Ben Shapiro Show* in which, among many bad takes, he argued against the symbolic meaning of *Black Panther* based on little more than the point, which no one disputed, that Wakanda is not a real place, as if fiction and art had never engaged real political issues before.[10] It is, to say the least, perplexing that the ideals of Wakanda are somehow illegitimate just because their backdrop is a fictional locale within a fictional world.

Although this response at least feigned engagement with the actual film, even if these conservatives essentially engaged with their own absurd conceptions of the world, the critique that *Black Panther* was unrealistic because it did not reflect a realistic representation of a specific, fictional place represented a burden never before placed on any movie in the superhero, fantasy, science-fiction, adventure, or any other fictional genre. It represented, at the very least, raising the bar and shifting the goalposts for this film at this time.[11]

The Third Stage of Alt-Right Grief: Coopting

But perhaps these answers were all wrong. Perhaps the truth was right in front of our eyes all along: Perhaps, in reality, the director of *Fruitvale Station* has in *Black Panther* secretly produced an homage to Donald Trump's America.[12] This interpretation requires a great deal of cherry picking, intellectual calisthenics, and (despite the fact that Wakanda is not real,) ignorance of the traditions of African Nationalism, Black Power, and Black Consciousness, all three rivers from which *Black Panther* drinks deeply.

The basis of the attempt to co-opt *Black Panther* into being secretly part of Team Conservative (Donald Trump, Proprietor) is that Wakanda is intentionally isolated from the rest of the world, is strong on border security, has an invisible barrier (or, as some have noted, "wall") to keep outsiders out, is anti-globalist, and is racially homogeneous. These things may or may not be true in whole or in part (and some may not even be "conservative" in any meaningful way, though that is another discussion) but they also only tell a part of the story of the movie.

Furthermore, context matters since apparently the right suddenly developed a desire to talk about real issues by engaging with the fictive Wakanda as if it WERE a real place. And the context of Wakanda is that it occupies a world whereby for Africans engagement with the outside world—especially with the West, and especially for those colonies and countries with natural resources—has always come at a heavy cost whether in the colonial era, during the proxy maneuverings of the Cold War, or in the subsequent years of neoliberal globalization. Thus Wakanda's "isolation" comes from a skepticism of neo-liberalism, of western force and threats of force, of Western condescension ("shitholes," anyone?[13]) and of external pressures that rarely have African interests at heart. Wakanda, with its immense human capital and its invaluable resource of vibranium, has refused to engage with the rest of the world, and even within Africa, because of a long history of exploitation and violence. The plot of the movie dives deep into some of these questions, but any attempt to place them within an American right-wing worldview is the result of a shallow and willful simplification of the film and an even more woeful misunderstanding of the African Nationalism that the movie invokes.

To be sure, African Nationalism, Black Power, and to perhaps a lesser degree Black Consciousness, which have always informed *Black Panther* from the time of its comic book origins in 1966, can and have been argued as having some conservative beliefs relative to what others—liberals, integrationists, and so forth—advocated at any given time.[14] But these are relative debates that took place within the left and oftentimes within what was by any measure, and certainly in the conservative mind, the radical left. There is no way to place these ideas within the larger camp of right wing, conservative, or alt-right thought, especially when those ideological realms have also been deeply infused with white nationalism and worse. It goes without saying that there are some very fine people on all sides of this internecine leftist debate.[15]

Conclusion

Not everyone has to love *Black Panther*. One need not find it to be a flawless masterpiece nor buy into every aspect of its putatively political message if indeed it truly has one. There have been insightful criticisms of the movie in addition to the hit jobs from the right.[16] There have also been insightful criticisms of the film or elements of its message from the left as well.[17]

Much of the coverage of *Black Panther* has attempted to be apolitical. And of course the overwhelming consensus has been one of praise. But whatever the merits of *Black Panther* as entertainment, as film, or even as a political statement, it deserves better than to be trolled, to be reduced either to the rather obvious statement that its setting is a fictional world or held to standards that almost no other film has ever had to meet, or to be co-opted by people desperate to reduce its message or to misrepresent it so deeply as to claim it as their own.

Notes

[1] See Isha Aran, "*Black Panther* Is Making Conservatives Feel Profoundly Threatened," *The Splinter*, February 21, 2018, https://splinternews.com/black-panther-is-making-conservatives-feel-profoundly-t-1823189335.

[2] Rotten Tomatoes is a film and television website that shows trailers for films, gives capsule plot summaries and provides other information. But among its most popular features is that it aggregates both critical and audience reviews of films, providing a score that indicates the overall impression, or "freshness score" for the film. Rotten Tomatoes, https://www.rottentomatoes.com.

[3] The page appears to have been shut down at least one time, but recently returned. https://www.facebook.com/Down-with-Disneys-Treatment-of-Franchises-and-its-Fanboys-1822779424446791/.

[4] See Randall Colburn, "The Covert Plan to Tank *Black Panther's Rotten Tomatoes* Score Is Not Going Well," *The A. V. Club*, February 2, 2018, https://www.avclub.com/the-covert-plan-to-tank-black-panthers-rotten-tomatoes-1822665732, and Trey Williams, "Alt-right Group Tries to Sabotage Disney's *Black Panther* on *Rotten Tomatoes*," *MarketWatch*, February 6, 2018,https://www.marketwatch.com/story/alt-right-group-wages-war-on-black-panther-and-disney-through-rotten-tomatoes-2018-02-01.

[5] Thomas Broome-Jones, "*Black Panther*'s Poor IMDb Score Is Indicative of Alt-Right Fear," *Cultured Vultures,* February 12, 2018, Thomas Broome-Jones, "Black Panther's Poor IMDb Score is Indicative of Alt-Right Fear," *Cultured Vultures,* February 12, 2018.

[6] Nick Field, "Make Movies Great Again: The 'Alt-Right' Cinematic Backlash," *WHYY*, February 11, 2018 https://whyy.org/articles/make-movies-great-alt-right-cinematic-backlash/.

[7] Ceri Parker, "*Black Panther*: Loved by the World, Hated by Trolls," World Economic Forum, *Agenda*, February 19, 2018, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/02/black-panther-loved-by-the-world-hated-by-trolls/

[8] People responded in droves on Twitter and elsewhere to the idea that Wakanda does not exist. Maybe the best and most cited was @ReignOfApril, https://twitter.com/reignofapril/status/964399385088950272?lang=en.

[9] *The New York Times*, February 10, 2018. On the inspirational/aspirational/influential aspects of *Black Panther* see also Anver Versi, "*Black Panther*: Changing Perceptions," *New African*, no. 582 (April 2018): 14-23, and Anna Deavere Smith, "Wakanda Forever!" *The New York Review of Books*, 65, no. 9 (May 24, 2018): 29-30.

[10] For the basic timeline of all of this see n.a., "Wakanda Isn't Real," "Know Your Meme," n.d., http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/wakanda-isnt-real. See also BROTHA WOLF, "Conservatives, We KNOW Wakanda Isn't Real," March 5, 2018, https://brothawolf.wordpress.com/2018/03/05/conservatives-we-know-wakanda-isnt-real/; On Shapiro's reaction see also Isha Aran, "Leading Conservative Thinker Ben Shapiro Loses His Shit Over *Black Panther*," *Splinter*, February 14, 2018,https://splinternews.com/leading-conservative-thinker-ben-shapiro-loses-his-shit-1823003856. Finally, as a fairly brilliant satire-cum-criticism of the "Wakanda is not real" crowd see Michael Harriot, "America: Wakanda for White People," *The Root*, February 22, 2018, https://www.theroot.com/america-wakanda-for-white-people-1823224399.

[11] It is also perhaps worth pointing out that Winona Dimeo-Ediger, writing at NPR, has noted that Wakanda may have been inspired by the southern African kingdom of Mutapa. See Winona Dimeo-Ediger, "*Black Panther*'s Mythical Home May Not Be So Mythical after All," NPR's "Goats and Sodas" , February 10. 2018, https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/02/10/583497786/black-panthers-mythical-home-may-not-be-so-mythical-after-all

[12] See Roy Edroso, "Conservatives Attack *Black Panther*—But When It Hits, Declare It Conservative, *The Village Voice*, February 20, 2018, https://www.villagevoice.com/2018/02/20/conservatives-attack-black-panther-but-when-it-hits-declare-it-conservative/; Taia Handlin, "Whitewashing *Black Panther*," BTRToday, February 22, 2018, http://www.btrtoday.com/read/featured/whitewashing-black-panther/; Jack Kapulsky, "Wakanda Forever," *The Liberty Conservative*, March 9, 2018, https://www.thelibertyconservative.com/wakanda-forever/; Craig Timberg, Drew Hartwell,

and Steven Zeitchik, "How White Nationalists are Trying to Co-Opt *Black Panther*," *The Switch* , *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/03/14/how-white-nationalists-are-trying-to-co-opt-black-panther/?utm_term=.13d14a7b83bd;

[13] Trump infamously referred to a number of countries, including Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and African nations as "shitholes" in a meeting in January 2018. See https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/12/unkind-divisive-elitist-international-outcry-over-trumps-shithole-countries-remark.

[14] Black Panther, created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, first appeared in Fantastic Four #52, July 1966.

[15] This of course refers to President Trump's assertion that there were "fine people" among the Nazis engaged in an alt-right, pro-white nationalism rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017. For a *New York Times* news analysis (with video of Trump's comments embedded) see https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/us/politics/trump-charlottesville-white-nationalists.html. For an assertive overview of Trump and racism see Prachi Gupta, "No Shit Donald Trump is Racist," at Jezebel's "The Slot," https://theslot.jezebel.com/no-shit-donald-trump-is-racist-1822023791.

[16] While it contains some of the same conservative tropes about *Black Panther,* Armond White's *National Review* excoriation of *Black Panther*, "*Black Panther's* Circle of Hype," (February 16, 2018) at least comes from an accomplished movie reviewer. That said, White is himself problematic, having positioned himself as a bit of a provocateur, the black film critic most likely to criticize black films from the right. He famously ruined the perfect Rotten Tomatoes critics' score for Jordan Peele's *Get Out* with his churlish review and was thrown out of the New York Film Critics Circle for heckling Steve McQueen, the director of *12 Years a Slave*—a film White also ruthlessly panned. White has become something of a Walter Williams for conservatives—a black right-winger who can provide legitimacy, or at least cover, for their criticisms of black culture and their revanchism on the politics of race in America. His reviews are evocative of some of the more acid—but fairer and more culturally informed and gracefully produced—criticisms of Stanley Crouch, whose most famous hit job might have been his highly negative review of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, "Do the Race Thing," *Village Voice*, June 20, 1989, collected in Stanley Crouch, *Notes of a Hanging Judge: Essays and Reviews, 1979-1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990): 237-244. Incidentally, *National Review* has a much better review of *Black Panther* that is overwhelmingly positive but with one fair but substantial criticism about whether the excellent science fiction story gets lost in the message. See Geraghty, "Why We Can't Have Wakanda," *National Review Online,* February 21, 2018, https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/02/wakanda-utopia-impossible-blame-human-nature/.

59

[17] See, for example, Russell Rickford, "I Have a Problem with *Black Panther*," *Africa is a Country*, https://africasacountry.com/2018/02/i-have-a-problem-with-black-panther/; See also the comments on *Black Panther* in Andy Kasrils' review of *Avengers: Infinity War* in "Avengers: Infinity Capitalism," *Mail & Guardian* [South Africa], April 20-25, 2018, Friday section, 8.

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