

Black Panther: A Black Girl's Song

by

Phyllisa Smith Deroze

When I watched Black Panther in Abu Dhabi during its opening weekend, I went not knowing what to expect and I left with a renewed spirit.

Black Panther answered Ntozake Shange's cry,
"somebody, anybody, sing a black girl's song."

Black Panther sang a precious melody that I needed to hear,
even after all these years.

Black Panther reached back in time,
played my song on an 8-track tape, and
healed the many times when my hymn became
"Half notes scattered"
and it rearranged the melody for me.

Like the day when I was told
I wouldn't receive one of the new
Tonka Trucks
that my brother and male cousins
unwrapped on Christmas Day.
I had the dolls.

The chord of disappointment from those days still remain.

They remain
just like memories of the days
I spent climbing trees,
turning back flips,
break-dancing on cardboard boxes,
and playing WWF characters.

Those were my joyous days,
until they needed to dissolve into the past
because I was told
that girls my age don't climb trees,
that I couldn't be Andre the Giant because I was girl,
that I couldn't back flip and break dance
in a skirt,
and being a girl,
I needed to start wearing skirts.

I resisted.

For my resistance,
I was called "Tom Boy"
rather than "warrior woman."

Black Panther teleported me back
to those days like a 70's slow jam,
wiped my tears,
gave me a space ship and a spear
and told me that a Tonka Truck was
beneath me,
anyway.

Black Panther whispered
that it understood that I
only wanted to build my strength
just like my cousins
and that all warriors needed strength.

In the Wakandan rhythms,
I trained as Dora Milaje.
I was finally able to be a super hero and
a girl.

In the vibrations
of the land of vibranium,
my anatomy doesn't lessen my power,
it highlights its strength.

Black Panther gave me
visuals and visions of
bald,
brown,
bold,
dark-skinned,
beautiful,
women that made
men and animals
bow at their feet.

Okoye's solo was
my heart string
because she was the superhero
that I always saw in my dreams.
She was the one
I tried to be in the 80s
but was muted.

I wanted to be a black woman so
powerful that when she fought,
no one knew automatically,
who would win.
I wanted an advanced and complexed
harmony
that was unlike the options I had available
during my childhood:
Super Girl, Wonder Woman, or Bionic Woman.

Black Panther
reminded me of the time I
attended a study group
for the Nation of Islam
and was told that I don't
cover myself for men,
but that I cover myself because
I know my own beauty
and strength
and I control who sees
all that Allah has given me.

I left that meeting with an irreversible level of empowerment.
Just as I've seen Wakanda
and I can't go back.

Black Panther sang
"a black girl's song" for me
and I am satisfied.

I am satisfied
because my daughter won't
be fed half notes on down beats.
She won't hear
girls don't play with tools of power.

She'll have more options
in the land of pretend than the princess.
(I hated being a princess).

She won't feel the need
to cover her Afro puffs with
straight blonde hair
or any hair at all
to be beautiful.

She'll know how to sing her song.
She will understand
that from her vantage point,
she's already beautiful and powerful.

And when she steps on the battlefield
in the world of make believe,
she will show up as a fighter
as confidently as she shows up
as a nurse or cook or a mother.

While she's too young to get it now
at 2 years old,
I marvel knowing that she'll
never have to experience
the disappointment
of some of her dreams,
like I did
because Black Panther
has given me back my song
and I will teach it to my daughter,
and together every time
we watch Black Panther,
our souls will sing a Black Girl's Song

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