

# Belonging: The Struggle of Two Worlds and Identity

by

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The *Black Panther*<sup>1</sup> presented the world with a renewed and unrivaled source of power and strength for the Black community and its supporters.<sup>2</sup> “Wakanda Forever” proved to be a rallying cry of solidarity as King T’Challa stood tall and proud, but fair, as a true leader of a powerful African nation. Though it is T’Challa’s struggle that is the central storyline of *Black Panther*, it is only through the presence of Killmonger that the king must truly consider both the past and future of Wakanda. There is an identity crisis throughout the film that is present in T’Challa as he accepts his new role as king, but for Killmonger this struggle is taken a step further as he fights for his place of belonging. The confusion of identity and belonging is strong and unrivaled within Killmonger because he views himself as both Wakandan and African American, yet there is no true place that he calls home. Killmonger is defined by his skin color in America, but in Wakanda, he is treated as an outsider. This journey of discovery, self-identification, belonging, and definition is an uphill battle upon which many embark.<sup>3</sup> As a Hispanic child adopted by a White family, Killmonger’s struggle was all too familiar to me.

Erik Killmonger, the unknown cousin and nemesis of T’Challa, makes an attempt to take over the Wakandan throne through brutality, violence, and manipulation. However, Killmonger is not inherently the bad guy of the film. He’s simply human. Killmonger’s actions against T’Challa are the burdens of anger, despair, and abandonment that forged his battle for identity and belonging between Wakanda and America.<sup>4</sup>

My identity was also similarly rooted. Growing up, there was no hiding that I didn’t belong within the world I had learned to call home as child. The majority of my family was blonde-haired and blue-eyed—the epitome of what had once been the foundation of the American dream—and my dark skin and jet black hair made me stick out like a sore thumb. However, I wasn’t always aware of my color or difference. It wasn’t until first grade, when a racial slur was spit angrily on the soccer field, that I was forced to fully understand that I was different from my family and the majority of my peers. The church I grew up in, the school that I attended with the label Mennonite, my family, my friends—they were all predominantly White. I wasn’t. I had always been physically aware of this difference but, until that moment, I had simply been Diana and my skin did not define my existence. Suddenly, I realized that it absolutely did.

That was the instant that I began questioning everything and experiencing the feelings of abandonment that Killmonger did. My birth mother had chosen drugs and money over myself and both my brothers. She went on to have another child after we had all been taken away, but she ultimately failed him too. There were days that I felt so betrayed that my anger barely allowed me to function. Killmonger used this anger of abandonment to fuel his endgame of taking the Wakandan throne and creating a world that he ruled. For me, this rage switched between hatred and paralyzing fear but always amplified my torn existence of belonging to two separate worlds.

Much in the way that Killmonger chose to define himself as Wakandan and African American, I found myself searching for my personal definition. I looked Hispanic, but I functioned as if I were White.<sup>5</sup> I had been raised on the family farm in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, with a conservative Christian ideology and, as I grew older, there were a few recognitions that became so clear that they were transparent. The first was that strangers did not see me the way I perceived myself. My White upbringing didn't matter, but my skin color did. Secondly, the way I was raised did not exactly match up with my personal beliefs. Lastly, I didn't belong in a White world, yet I didn't belong in a Hispanic one either.

In the beginning of *Black Panther*, a young Killmonger asks of his father: "Baba... tell me a story... A story about home." The story his father tells is the history of Wakanda, but this dream is shattered when Killmonger's father is killed by his own brother, T'Chaka, the king of Wakanda. In the same respect, my home was destroyed when my birth mother chose her habit over her children but, also like Killmonger, there was opportunity for this home to be rebuilt. Unfortunately, both of our homes were rebuilt within an America that used melanin to define who we are as people. Killmonger and his father both experienced the world outside of Wakanda that was built upon discrimination. Fear is what placed Killmonger in a status of equilibrium between being Wakandan and African American.<sup>6</sup> What does one truly embrace? The world that killed your father, or the one that defines you by color? After learning that the outside world did characterize me by my skin color, I faced a similar decision as Killmonger: Did I find my place amongst the society that was unwilling to embrace my Hispanic roots, or did I try to adapt to a culture that I felt unable to claim?

This struggle for identity and belonging remained prominent for the majority of my life and became further complicated by my decision to finally come out as a lesbian.<sup>7</sup> The conservative Christian ideology that I was raised with had been waging a long and difficult battle against my sexual identity, but I ultimately chose who I truly was. I finally felt like I was finding my way in the world when I made the difficult decision to come out but, simultaneously, my identity crisis, rooted in the way I had been raised, was at the forefront of my mind. How could I possibly reconcile my Christianity with a sexual identity that I had been told was wrong and sinful and would warrant a sentence of eternal damnation? Truly, there wasn't a way I could reconcile this except to create a new identity that was simply the Diana I had always desired the world to see.

Both Killmonger and T'Challa embraced what they felt to be their destiny. Killmonger's endgame was fueled by the ultimate inability to reconcile the struggle of identity and belonging. He never found his place until the end of his life when T'Challa carried him to the mouth of the Black Panther cave, and he finally recognized Wakandan beauty in the sunset that his father had always told him about. It is also in this moment that T'Challa realized that, despite his misguided actions, Killmonger was right in his belief that Wakanda could change the world. They could no longer close themselves off from, or ignore the struggles of, Africans who had been scattered around the globe by history. It was time for Wakanda to create a new path of identity and belonging in honor of Erik Killmonger, son of N'Jobu, Prince of Wakanda. I was never truly able to reconcile the differences of the worlds that I had found myself existing within but I was able to establish my own identity and place of belonging amongst those who accepted and loved me for who I was, who taught me to be proud of the person I had become, and who stood in solidarity with me amongst the battles I had fought.

So: "Who are you?"

## **Bibliography**

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>*Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler (2018; Burbank, CA: Marvel Studios, 2018), DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 124-135. This book provides specific insight to the Black Panther Party and their objectives as an organization. The Black Panthers are often misunderstood as a militant group but they were founded upon the idea of protecting African American communities against police brutality that was occurring along the West Coast of America. Additionally, the Black Panther Party's goal was to create an African American identification that was proud and would no longer be oppressed. The specific chapter noted here focuses on how the Black Panthers worked to define the Black aesthetic and culture.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Weedon, *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging*. (Berkshire: McGraw-Hill, 2004). Weedon focuses on how identity and culture vary amongst individuals and affect one's sense of belonging within their native or outside cultures.

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Holler, "Rethinking Narrative Identity: Person and Perspective," *Studies in Narrative* 17, (2013): 1-209. Holler, in conjunction with other contributing narrative authors, offer thoughts and analysis based on how one defines themselves. This is a cross-cultural narrative study that views lives as stories and how these stories may be engaged.

<sup>5</sup> Jorge J.E. Garcia, *Forging People: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in Hispanic American and Latino/a Thought*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2011). Garcia's book focuses on how Hispanic Americans define themselves within America. There is also contribution from native Latino/a individuals who have visited or immigrated to the United States. They share their experiences and histories regarding the Hispanic/Latino and American divide.

<sup>6</sup> Genevieve Fabre and Robert G. O'Meally, *History and Memory in African-American Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Fabre and O'Meally provide a historical basis of the African American culture and the difficulties that were faced in keeping memory alive. The book points to authors such as Zora Neale Hurston and W.E.B. Du Bois to discuss memory in literature. African American memory from an anthropological, cultural, and philosophical perspective is also presented.

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Walker, *Looking Like What You Are: Sexual Style, Race, and Lesbian Identity*. (New York: New York University Press, 2001). Walker presents the social stipulations of looking a certain way based on sexual style, race, and a lesbian identity. The author also discusses these subjects when presented together and how sexuality may physically look different across cultures based upon social constructs. Walker works to break the stereotype that sexuality amongst races does not need to look a specific way.

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