If You Can See It, You Can Be It: *Black Panther's* Black Woman Magic

by

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In spring semester 2018, I taught my dream course as a feminist scholar and lover of science fiction and fantasy literature, a senior seminar on the writings of Octavia Butler. I began the course by acquainting students with the history of science fiction and fantasy. Many critics define science fiction as literature that is based on real or imaginary science whereas fantasy is based on magic or the supernatural. However, the works of African American science fiction and fantasy writers like Butler, such as her famous novel *Kindred*, often challenge these distinctions.[1] Butler herself maintained that *Kindred* is a fantasy novel rather than science fiction because she does not use a vehicle such as a time machine to transport the novel's protagonist back into the past.[2] However, we can read *Kindred* as science fiction if we see it as being based on an Afrocentric rather than Eurocentric notion of time. For people of African descent, the past is ever present. Thus works like *Kindred,* written from an Afrocentric perspective, challenge a hard core distinction between the "science" of science fiction and the "magic" of fantasy. Indeed, a basic definition of both genres might simply be that science fiction and fantasy are works that allow writers the freedom to imagine people in situations that do not occur in real life. These imaginary scenarios, however, can and do have real-life effects. For instance, Skype/videoconferencing, cell phones, helicopters, robots, and tasers are just a few examples of technologies that were first imagined in science fiction.

Even more powerful is the ability of science fiction and fantasy to imagine empowering social and political roles for marginalized people. Films that featured Black presidents of the U.S. such as *Deep Impact* (Morgan Freeman), *The Fifth Element* (Tom Lister Jr.), and *Left Behind* (Louis Gossett, Jr.), no matter how fantastical or even comic, arguably set the stage for Barack Obama's presidency.[3] As the saying goes, "if you can see it, you can be it." Similarly, *Black Panther* helps us to envision a technologically and intellectually advanced African nation in Wakanda, one in which Black women play important roles. Princess Shuri, Ramonda, the mother of Shuri and T'Challa, and Okoye, the leader of the Dora Milaje, are the very definition of "Black girl magic," a term coined by CaShawn Thompson in 2013 "to celebrate the beauty, power, and resilience of Black women."[4] As with the case of imagined technologies, one can hope that these visions will also become reality for the futures of Black women.

Several key moments illustrate the central ethos of “Black woman magic”[5] of both the imaginary Wakanda and of the film itself. For instance, in the crucial fight scene in the South Korean nightclub, Okoye, who had donned a short, wavy-haired wig as part of her disguise, gleefully snatches her wig off in relief once the fight begins. The audience with whom I first saw the movie, comprised mostly of Black women, all roared in delight at this moment, recognizing the underlying meaning behind Okoye’s action. (We also chuckled at the beginning of the movie when Zuri, in disguise, informed N’Jobu that there were some “Grace Jones looking sisters” at the door who had come looking for N’Jobu. His comment humorously connected the Dora Milaje soldiers to Jones’ fierce warrior character Zula from *Conan the Destroyer*.) As a strong Wakandan woman, Okoye chafes visibly at the idea of trying to fit into the outside world’s normative, Eurocentric beauty ideals. Instead, she prefers the gorgeous simplicity of her bald head, which allows her to fight with ease without hair obscuring her vision.

Shuri, T’Challa’s younger sister, also displays the “Black woman magic” that makes her a role model especially for young Black women. She plays the archetypal character of the technological wizard whose creative inventions fuel the science fiction hero’s fight against evil. The futuristic marvels that assist T’Challa at crucial moments are all her inventions: from the new Black Panther suit that is a more nondescript disguise, to the flight simulation system that allows CIA Agent Ross to defeat Killmonger’s attacking space ships, to the medical system that allows her to heal Agent Ross after he is shot. Young girls watching the film get to see Shuri as a confident creator of advanced technologies, a young dynamo with unlimited potential. While the scene when Shuri interrupts T’Challa’s coronation ceremony as though to challenge him is played for laughs, the audience I was with gasped, recognizing the potential of Shuri as Queen of Wakanda in a world where women are such intellectual powerhouses and skilled fighters. Though young, Shuri could pose a real challenge to T’Challa’s claim to the throne of Wakanda, as we witness when she displays her fighting skills later in the movie.

Nakia, T’Challa’s love interest, serves as the moral and political heart of the film. She is a foil to T’Challa’s father T’Chaka in her role as the film’s “spy.” From the first moment we first see her, Nakia is working not only in the interests of Wakanda, but of the African diaspora as a whole. Operating undercover as a hostage, she is first introduced in a scene that alludes to the kidnappings of 264 young Nigerian girls by the terrorist group Boko Haram in 2014. With the aid of Black Panther and Okoye, she uses her “Black woman magic” to successfully free the girls, a conscripted boy soldier, and herself. Her heroic actions are a double-edged reproof. In this moment and in others in the film, Nakia’s exploits reproach T’Chaka’s refusal to engage in political and martial action on behalf of the Pan-African world. Metatextually, the film also protests the Nigerian government’s underwhelming response to Boko Haram’s crimes against these young women. It further signifies on the lackluster global reception to the #BringBackOurGirls campaign and Twitter movement, implicitly making the statement that our world largely ignores the appropriation and consumption of Black female bodies.

Nakia's clandestine activities also aid in reviving T'Challa when she steals the last remaining heart-shaped herb that fuels the Black Panther. The ritual where Ramonda crushes the herb to make the potion is an evocative allusion to the roles that African women have played historically in African healing systems and beliefs. Despite the fact that Wakanda is a technologically advanced nation fueled by the metal vibranium (the science), Black Panther's physical strength comes from African woman-centered "magic" that Ramonda performs.

Black Panther, thus, powerfully illustrates that for people of the African diaspora, magic and science are not opposites but instead are complementary. The "Black woman magic" of Shuri, Nakia, and Ramonda is essential to the power structure that T'Challa inaugurates in Wakanda as the new Black Panther. Hopefully, the films' sociopolitical critiques of how Black women have been treated and simultaneous spotlighting of Black women's strength and resilience is a message that will have long lasting effects in the future.[6]

Notes

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[1] Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).

[2] Randall Kenan, "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler," *Callaloo* 14, no. 2 (1991): 495-504.

[3] *The Fifth Element*, directed by Luc Besson, (Los Angeles: Sony Pictures Entertainment, 1997); *Deep Impact*, directed by Mimi Leder (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1998); *Left Behind III: World at War*, directed by Craig R. Baxley (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2005).

[4] Julee Wilson, "The Meaning of #BlackGirlMagic, and How You Can Get Some of It." *Huffington Post*, January 12, 2016. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-is-black-girl-magic-video_us_5694dad4e4b086bc1cd517f4.

[5] I prefer to use the term "Black woman magic" rather than "Black girl magic" in this essay to give respect to the varying ages of the Black women characters in the film.

[6] For some further literary works that feature strong Black female characters and/or African settings, see the following: Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed, Mind of My Mind, Parable of the Sower, and Parable of the Talents;* Tananarive Due's African Immortals series (*My Soul to Keep* (1997), *The Living Blood (*2001), *Blood Colony* (2008), and *My Soul to Take* (2011)*;* Steven's Barnes's series *Lion's Blood* (2002) and *Zulu Heart* (2003); and Charles Saunders's *Imaro* series (*Imaro* (1981); *The Quest for Cush* (1984); *The Trail of Bohu* (1985); and *The Naama War*([2009).