

To Whom Does Wakanda Belong?

by

Makeba Lavan

In his seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois famously asks “How does it feel to be a problem?” (p. 1). This question is the embodiment of the Black experience in the United States. Further, the quote underscores Erik “Killmonger” Stevens/N’Jadaka’s predicament as he seeks to win the Wakandan throne and become the Black Panther. Killmonger is born of a Wakandan prince and an African American woman who died in prison. His father N’Jobu becomes a ‘war dog’ (a Wakandan spy sent to observe American culture). When N’Jobu tires of his aggressively passive mission, his own brother T’Chaka kills him.

This murder occurs within the first few minutes of the movie. Journalist Steven Thrasher notes that “one of the most noble aims of *Black Panther*, (an overall great example of Afro-futurism) is how it dreams of and conceives of an intact Black body—both the intact national body of Wakanda as well the actual intact body of T’Challa in his suit.” Unfortunately, neither N’Jobu nor N’Jadaka are afforded the same treatment. This illuminates a very significant difference; N’Jobu and N’Jadaka are both killed by relatives for the same reason: They wish to arm Black people in order to end global racial oppression. Obviously, this premise is too bold even for a movie that appears to be an Afro-futurist manifesto. Two generations of Wakandans unsuccessfully strive for an African diasporic uprising only to be killed by the very people who could actually help achieve their goals.

Before his untimely demise, Killmonger proves his knowledge of western imperialism. In the opening British Museum scene, he demands of the white curator, “How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it, like they took everything else?” Killmonger believes that his destiny is to create a new, Black-led global empire. In order to do this, he needs Wakanda’s vibranium. Before his battle with T’Challa, Killmonger/N’Jadaka scolds the Wakandan court, “Two billion people all over the world who look like us whose lives are much harder, and Wakanda has the tools to liberate them all. Where was Wakanda?” Killmonger’s fury at Wakandan inaction is palpable. In “The Negro in American Culture” (1961), James Baldwin concludes that “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won’t destroy you.”

This certainly applied to Killmonger. As a young Black man in the United States, Killmonger will always be viewed as a threat. His military training and natural intelligence (he attended M.I.T.) form an almost psychotic cunning. Further, his enmity compounds with the loss of his Wakandan birthright and the harsh rejection of his long-lost family. Ultimately, N'Jadaka's tragic trajectory is borne of this rejection.

Many African Americans wish to know their African roots. N'Jadaka was raised on stories of Wakandan glory and freedom. He did, in fact, know where he came from. Sadly, his surviving family rejects him; leaving him alone, bitter and desperate for revenge. In a 1964 television interview, Malcolm X, when asked about America's progress toward racial equality, famously stated, "If you stick a knife in my back nine inches and pull it out six inches, there's no progress. If you pull it all the way out that's not progress. Progress is healing the wound that the blow made. And they haven't even pulled the knife out much less heal the wound. They won't even admit the knife is there." When T'Challa and company reject him without even an attempt at discourse, they are refusing to acknowledge the knife as well as the pain it still causes. Inevitably, T'Challa kills N'Jadaka. As he kneels before the majestic Wakandan sunset, N'Jadaka refuses T'Challa's offer to save his life. Instead, he urges T'Challa to "Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships. Because they knew death was better than bondage." Killmonger's last words, though highly dramatic, really highlight his conflation of enslavement with imprisonment.

N'Jadaka refuses to live in Wakanda as a prisoner. Completely robbed of his birthright, at the end of the movie, Killmonger is an enemy of the state. But Killmonger's death acts as a catalyst. T'Challa's encounter with Killmonger leads him to end Wakanda's isolation and he starts a Wakandan Outreach Center in the very building in which his father killed his uncle. Sadly, N'Jadaka does not live to see or take part in this vision. And that is the biggest travesty of *Black Panther*; no reconciliation occurs between the African and African American family.

A much more poignant ending could have placed N'Jadaka at the Outreach Center in a collaborative leadership role with a Wakandan emissary. But as W'Kabi so tellingly states: "You let the refugees in, you let in all their problems." It is obvious that most people, including other African diasporic people would be "problems" that the Wakandan government has no interest in welcoming. Even the Oakland outreach center is a compromise: Bring Wakanda to the world, but not vice versa. And in this way, *Black Panther* has served as an excellent entry point to discuss diasporic relationships, nationalism, and foreign policy in the classroom while ultimately examining what we owe each other, if anything.

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Makeba Lavan, MA (City University of New York), is a doctoral student and graduate teaching fellow at City University of New York. She has published in *Modern Language Studies* and *Lost and Found* journals.