

Three Theses about *Black Panther*

by

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I enjoyed Marvel's *Black Panther* for many of the same reasons that millions of other moviegoers have fallen in love with the film: the seductive depiction of an Africa unburdened by colonialism and slavery; the celebrations of Black family and Black love; and the portraits of smart, powerful, passionate women. I have seen it twice and will probably see it again. I plan to order the DVD.

A bit reluctantly (because I wanted to savor my enjoyment for as long as I could), I went looking for analyses of the movie. I found Christopher Lebron's "Black Panther Is Not the Movie We Deserve," Max S. Gordon's "Come Get Your Life, Come Get Your Death," and Adam Serwer's "The Tragedy of Eric Killmonger."¹ I admit that at first I thought that these authors were just Americans griping about the fact that their story of Blackness is not foregrounded in the film. As a Black woman from Guyana, I had actually found something salutary in *Black Panther's* provincializing of American Blackness. To me, this dynamic was just a reminder that African Americans are part of something larger, and that they do not have exclusive purchase on what it means to be Black. Despite my reservations about the film's treatment of Black Americans, I still applaud the writers and director for emphasizing diasporic identity. But I got to wondering about the currents of frustration and disappointment that run through these pieces. This essay is my effort to identify the sources of those currents. It is also, I hope, provocation for future conversation.

My first argument is this: Wakandans are not Black—at least not at first. Their collective self-definition is tethered to conceptions of nation, tribal alliance, and geography. While Nakia and W'Kabi exhibit impulses to reach beyond the borders, even their sense of obligation to the world beyond Wakanda is based on a sense of moral obligation and *noblesse oblige* that comes with privilege: they want to help suffering people, but not necessarily because they believe that those people are like them. Neither character articulates what we might term a racial awareness that emphasizes kinship with other Africans. If Blackness is a diasporic consciousness, forged and forced into existence by long histories of violence, resistance, and renegotiation, then the Wakandans, who have shielded themselves from that history in the interest of preserving their way of life, are effectively cut off from Blackness. They do not see themselves, and we cannot see them, as part of the diaspora.

Inviting us to imagine what Black people could have been without European colonization, *Black Panther* conjures up vivid, compelling possibilities of political stability, unbroken ties to tradition, rapid technological advancement, even gender equality. War in Wakanda is largely stylized ritual, and the greatest warriors of the land are women. Cultural diversity is visible and celebrated. Commerce is booming. Tech innovation, seemingly inevitable, is apparently driven not by necessity but by the imagination and ingenuity of a millennial woman. The supply of vibranium is endless. (Ecology and technology have achieved such synergistic balance that mining vibranium apparently poses no dangers.) No one seems to be suffering and the nation's heavily fortified borders are virtually impervious. No wonder, then, that Wakandans resist efforts to extend the community of empathy and kinship beyond the force field of their border.

This brings me to my second thesis: Ironically, this fantasy of an alternative future—the same one that has drawn so many Black people to *Black Panther* and kept so many of us coming back to the film—is a fantasy about the erasure (or rather the ingenious evasion) of the very history that produced Blackness as we understand it, particularly in the United States. The critiques offered by Gordon, Lebron, and Serwer arise in part from this central irony. Each author recognizes and wrestles with the ways that the movie simultaneously celebrates and resists being Black.

My third claim, rooted in the first two, is that Erik “Killmonger” Stevens is the only Black character in the film. His is the historically aware and historically burdened diasporic consciousness that assumes a necessary allegiance between Wakandans and the 2 billion other people in the world who, as Killmonger says, “look like them.” Killmonger understands Blackness in terms of shared suffering and mutual obligation, and his understanding of Blackness has far more in common with the conceptions of Blackness that American audiences would recognize. This historical consciousness, this awareness of the imagined community of the Black diaspora, is what Wakanda needs from him in order to expand its ethical vision. And it is also why Black audiences need Killmonger to help us lay claim to Wakanda. Because Wakandans cannot be Black without someone to articulate the claim that they are part of a larger community. Killmonger, in his monstrosity and tragedy, both asserts claims of blackness on Wakanda and embodies the need for the fantasy world to confront the results of this history of violence and injustice. Wakanda is a fortress that defends against history. Killmonger breaks in on that fortress to assert his claim—Black people's claim—to kinship.

All of this is why I wanted so desperately for Killmonger to be redeemed and recognized as Wakandan. To me, embracing, recognizing and healing Killmonger would make Wakanda Black. At the very least, I hoped that the film would hold out that possibility. Instead, and here I have to agree with Christopher Lebron's analysis, *Black Panther* falls short because it cloaks Killmonger in familiar and dangerous clichés of Black (American) gangsterism (Lebron 2018).

The film succumbs to the stereotypes. Killmonger's tragedy—his traumatic loss of his entire family, his sense of moral obligation to a larger Black diasporic community of suffering—all morph into violent, shortsighted egotism and hyper-masculine megalomaniacal aggression. As Adam Serwer notes, Killmonger “cannot see beyond his own rage.” (Serwer 2018) His vision of the world “starting over” begins with an apocalyptic bloodbath: he wants vengeance against all colonizers, and their allies, and their children. Sadly, all notions of Blackness as community, history, or creative energy are absorbed into the void of his own ego and personal pain. Of course he has to be stopped. Of course he has to die.

And of course, the film's creators endeavor to compensate for his loss by offering a way out of the dilemma they have created. The way out is through T'Challa whose encounter with his doomed cousin compels him to reconceive his relationship to Black people. Killmonger is the catalyst for the emergence of T'Challa's Black consciousness, even if, as Adam Serwer has also argued, T'Challa's initial conception of his relationship to Black people carries neocolonial undertones.

Black Panther and Wakanda constitute a fantasy about suppressed possibilities for societies and cultures on the African continent, and for many viewers that is an important part of the film's appeal. But as I have argued, that fantasy about other possible histories and futures is not a vision of blackness—at least not fully. And yet, I still see much to celebrate in the movie. Some of what I celebrate has little to do with the narrative: the depictions of dark skin inhabited proudly, without stigma or self-consciousness or anxiety, both strike a chord and meet a need. However, I am also willing to celebrate the film's dramatization of the emergence, albeit flawed and incomplete, of a more inclusive and nuanced vision of Blackness. That vision, which brings the creative energy and imaginative possibility of Afro-futurism together with an historical awareness and a sense of kinship with a larger community, offers a compelling image of Black possibility for the twenty-first century. If only Killmonger could have seen it.

Notes

¹

Gordon, Max S. 2018. *Come Get Your Life, Come Get Your Death: On Race, Gender, and Queer Politics in Ryan Coogler's 'Black Panther'*. February 22. Accessed April 14, 2018. <https://medium.com/s/story/come-get-your-life-come-get-your-death-on-ryan-cooglers-black-panther-616039d97e5d>.

Lebron, Christopher. 2018. "'Black Panther' Is Not the Movie We Deserve." *The Boston Review*, February 17.

Serwer, Adam. 2018. "The Tragedy of Erik Killmonger." *The Atlantic*, February 21. 2018.

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