

Echoes of Pan Africanism in *Black Panther*

by

Rosemary A. Onyango

Black Panther, directed by Ryan Coogler, signals a milestone in black superhero movies. It features a Third World African nation, Wakanda, that is independent and technologically advanced due to its vast reserves of vibranium, a robust metal that has fueled its impressive innovations.¹ Populated by capable superheroes and other characters, the movie focuses on a conflict between cousins T'Challa and Killmonger, each with a strong emotional attachment to the royal throne and their immediate families. I found the movie engaging and in some ways difficult to detach from as a work of fiction. It confronts relevant issues that offer opportunities for introspection and discussions.

This reflection focuses on the film's resonance with Pan Africanism defined broadly to include a conscious identification with Africa and mutual responsibility for people of African descent to work in solidarity to liberate themselves from varied forms of oppression and exploitation.² It is informed by my experiences as a woman of African descent who has spent several years teaching in Kenya and the United States.

Black Panther essentializes Pan Africanism of twentieth century activists who believed in creating societies in which reclaiming power, history and culture would be possible. These included W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X and women such as Amy Jacques Garvey, Amy Ashwood Garvey and Shirley Graham Du Bois (henceforth referred to by their maiden names). Although they often expressed opposing strategies for activism, they shared ideals of freedom and social and economic empowerment. While Du Bois supported self-determination for Africans and leaders for their benefit, Garvey as an emigrationist promoted pride in African culture, economic independence envisioning himself a feasible leader of Africa.³

Incisive speeches, actions and writings of Carmichael, Nkrumah and Malcolm underscored their deep reverence and faith in Black humanity globally. In 1961 Carmichael moved to West Africa to join Nkrumah, believing that Pan Africanism was a logical step after his activism in the U.S. Civil Rights movement.⁴ Cognizant that unity was central to shaping respect for human rights of African descendants, Nkrumah formed the Organization of African Unity in 1963 that institutionalized Pan Africanism.⁵ Likewise, several of Malcolm's speeches instilled pride in Black heritage, physical appearance and dignity, and reiterated that Africans and African Americans had similar struggles that they needed to confront jointly.⁶

Black Panther is a multilayered work of fiction that awakens in the viewers a long view of African history. Its depiction of a nation whose progress seemingly rests on a well-charted past defies narrow versions history and denigrating labels associated with the “Third World” that reinforce the notion that Africa is regressive and devoid of positive images. It challenges distortions that histories of powerful people and progress are the preserve of non-African countries. Because leadership is hereditary in Wakanda, T’Challa (Chadwick Boseman) succeeds his father T’Chaka, (John Kani), as Ramonda, Queen Mother (Angela Bassett), and sister Shuri (Letitia Wright) become part of the ruling triad.⁷ Furthermore, closeness to royalty renders privileges to those invested in Wakanda’s political, cultural and economic spheres, which raises questions about treatment of ordinary citizens.

The movie reveals varied levels of elasticity related to characters jointly proud of their nation and culture. Aspects of African centered spirituality and aesthetics related to those Garvey and Malcolm supported are exemplified by the royal family. The cast displays proficiency in varied languages (Xhosa, Hausa, English and Korean) that are enhanced with accents, sounds and gestures derived from African oral tradition including a memorable Wakandan salute, a symbol of their power and national pride. These aspects include varieties of hair styles, facial and body marks, apparel and accessories namely beaded jewelry and metallic necklaces and colorful blankets.

Moreover, women including Ashwood, Jacques and Graham were Pan African activists who strived to defy being eclipsed by male leaders in ways that reflect roles of key women characters in *Black Panther*. Ashwood was a founder of Garvey’s organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, in 1916, and a feminist devoted to empowering people of African descent.⁸ Likewise, Jacques was an advocate of women’s rights and an organizer of Garvey’s movement.⁹ After relocating to Ghana in 1961 with Du Bois, Graham headed a television network, organized African American settlement and edited, *Freedomways* that publicized views of African leaders including President Nkrumah whom she advised.¹⁰

Likewise, Wakandan women, General Okoye (Danai Gurira), detective Nakia (Lupita Nyong’o) and innovator Shuri (Letitia Wright) serve with ferocious tenacity showing their expertise with traditional and technologically advanced weapons. They challenge typical gender roles in ways that can inculcate pride and spur discussions about gender equality, cultural identity and notions of beauty.

However, some scenes that unsettle feelings of pride include the conflict between cousins T'Challa and Killmonger. Killmonger's defiance to T'Challa's ascent to Wakanda's throne is partially due to T'Chaka's murder of his father N'Jobu (Sterling K. Brown). Killmonger suffers a double tragedy as an orphan with a limited grasp of his African roots. His questioning of Wakanda's failure to intervene during slavery resonates with concerns of radical Pan-Africanists. His plight enables us to contemplate conflicts that damage relationships within family and nations and how they can be resolved.

From lessons in nationalism, history, racial representation and inclusion, to affirming gender equality, *Black Panther* touches on several issues and offers opportunities to engage in exchanges with youth and young adults.

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Notes

1. *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler, (Los Angeles Marvel Studios, 2018)
2. Michael Williams, "The Pan African Movement" in *Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Mario Azevedo, (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005): 173.
3. Manning Marable, "The Pan-Africanism of W.E.B. Du Bois," in *Black Leadership: Four Great American Leaders and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 75-89.
4. Donald McCormack, "Stokely Carmichael and Pan-Africanism: Back to Black Power." *The Journal of Politics* 35, no. 2 (1973): 406-7.
5. Ama Biney, "The Legacy of Kwame Nkrumah in Retrospect," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 2, no. 3 (2008): 129-31.
6. *Malcolm X: Make It Plain*, produced by Orlando Bagwell and Judy Richardson, (New York: PBS Video, 1994), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zIGNkR62Mo>
7. [Editors' note] See discussion in the introduction about African matriarchy and the ruling team of a male monarch along with his mother and his sister.
8. Tony Martin, *Amy Ashwood Garvey: Pan-Africanist, Feminist and Mrs. Marcus Garvey No. 1 or a Tale of Two Amies*, (Fitchburg, MA: Majority Press, 2007): 22-53.
9. Manning Marable & Leith Mullings "Women as Leaders," Amy Euphemia Jacques Garvey, 1925 ed. In *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: An African American Anthology*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009): 251-52.
10. Ama Biney. "The Legacy of Kwame Nkrumah in Retrospect," *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2, no. 3 (2008): 129-31.

Rosemary Onyango, PhD (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), is Instructor of Africana Studies at Eastern Illinois University. Her research interests include policy issues and their effect on learners, comparative study of the role of women of African descent in various social movements, gender, African women and development, and images of women of African heritage in literature and films.