

The power of Wakanda

Getting millions of Americans to consider the merits of black armed revolution against global oppression is no small feat.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [March 28, 2018](#) issue



Lupita Nyong'o as Nakia (left), Chadwick Boseman as T'Challa–Black Panther (center), and Danai Gurira as Okoye in *Black Panther*. Photo © Marvel Studios

It is hard to overstate the excitement around or the significance of *Black Panther*, the newest film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the first to feature a black superhero and overwhelmingly black cast. The movie, directed by Ryan Coogler, has broken box-office records, inspired Twitter campaigns ([#WakandaForever](#) and [#WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe](#) to name just a couple), and generated enough provocative critical essays to keep you reading for a week.

The movie lives up to its hype. It excels as a superhero action film while pressing the boundaries of what the superhero genre can say about politics, diversity, and the

power of fantasy to shape moral imagination.

At the center of the narrative and the vision of the film is Wakanda, a fictional central African country that is the kingdom of the Black Panther and an object of desire and debate for the central characters. Wakanda is home to the world's largest deposit of vibranium, a fictional metal with quasi-supernatural properties. Over thousands of years of experimentation, Wakandans have marshaled the properties of vibranium to create the most technologically advanced civilization on earth. They have also used the super metal to cloak themselves from the outside world, thereby evading centuries of enslavement, massacre, and colonization that ravished the rest of Africa.

Wakanda is more like Tolkien's Middle Earth than Superman's Metropolis. Every detail hints at deeper histories, mythologies, and symbol systems. But unlike Middle Earth, Wakanda exists within the boundaries of real time. The visual and aural beauty of the film draws on pan-African traditions—actual histories, symbol systems, and mythologies that have been degraded or ignored by white constructions of Africa as a land bereft of culture and history. In this blend of fantasy and history, Wakanda is a challenge to the racist fantasies that have dominated white ideas about Africa and its peoples. It also provides the context for new conversations about political and moral responsibility.

The main characters take up these conversations directly. T'Challa, king of Wakanda, is also the Black Panther (Chadwick Boseman)—a superhero imbued with superhuman strength, agility, and self-healing powers through the gifts of a magical herb. His best friend and adviser, W'Kabi (Daniel Kaluuya), wants Wakanda to take a more aggressive role in world politics. The king's former lover and close friend, Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o), is an undercover agent who helps other Africans and black people in the diaspora. She wants Wakanda to open its borders for humanitarian, not military, purposes. The debates about Wakanda's place in the wider world—and the obligation each age owes for the sins of the past—reach their boiling point in T'Challa's confrontation with Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan).

Killmonger wants Wakanda to lead a black global revolution. As a black kid from Oakland, he lives with the reality created by hundreds of years of white supremacist culture and policy. And as a top-level military-trained CIA operative, he embodies a neoliberal American approach to global politics: he specializes in destabilizing regimes, arming insurgents, and seizing power in the chaos that follows. He wants to

wield the power of Wakanda to unleash a new black-led empire on which the sun will never set. That his tactics don't sit easily with his vision of pan-African unity doesn't mean he's not onto something. If a wealthy, powerful, technologically advanced Wakanda did exist, what obligations would it have to intervene in the geopolitical order? His challenge to Wakanda has real force, and we cannot help sympathizing with him (or possibly even rooting for him).

Getting millions of Americans to seriously debate the merits of black armed revolution against systemic global oppression is no small feat. *Black Panther* makes space for this debate because it tells a different story about the moral reckoning of the modern world than the one we are accustomed to seeing in superhero fantasies.

In *Black Panther*, the great theater of modern history does not unfold in Europe or America, but in Africa. The moral scale on which modernity is weighed does not involve the defense of liberty by Western heroes in World War I or II or the Cold War—favorite historical backdrops for superhero origin tales—but the loss of liberty imposed by Europeans and North Americans on Africans and their descendants in slavery and colonialism.

The film contains exactly one sympathetic white person, CIA operative Everett Ross (Martin Freeman). His greatest acts of heroism involve shutting his mouth and doing what is asked of him by the Wakandans who save his life. As he does this, he begins to see that everything he has been taught is at best a half-truth and at worse a lie.

That lesson is not so different from what *Black Panther* offers to consumers of superhero fantasy, so long dominated by white American heroic ideals. It makes the stories we tell about the struggle for justice and heroism, about who is on the right side of history and how they got there, seem like children's fantasies created to cover over lies, brutality, and contradictions. The film offers another fantasy in their place.

Like Killmonger, we have a hard time imagining power, technological innovation, and wealth as anything except prerequisites for conquest. Wakanda is a vision of modern progress untethered to the relentless pursuit of domination and accumulation. I will shut up and listen. I just want to be invited back. #WakandaForever.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The witness of Wakanda."