



3-30-2018

Racism and Capitalism in Black Panther

Kyle Derkson

University of Toronto, kyle.derkson@mail.utoronto.ca

Recommended Citation

Derkson, Kyle (2018) "Racism and Capitalism in Black Panther," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 , Article 40.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol22/iss1/40>

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Racism and Capitalism in Black Panther

Abstract

This is one of a series of film reviews of *Black Panther* (2018), directed by Ryan Coogler.

Keywords

Black Panther, Marvel, Race, Superheroes



Black Panther opens by contrasting two worlds. First, we have a brief history of Wakanda, a fictional African nation. A long time ago, a meteor containing vibranium – the most valuable material in the MCU – fell from the sky onto the location of Wakanda. Hidden away from the world, Wakanda thrives. Wakanda is home to King T’Challa, the current Black Panther. Wakanda is the world he knows. Immediately after having this introduction to the Afrofuturist world of Wakanda we are transported to Oakland, California, 1992. Here we are introduced to Zuri and N’Jobu, two Wakandans who are fighting for the liberation of Black Americans. In this scene, they meet T’Chaka, T’Challa’s father. Because their fight for liberation is at odds with keeping Wakanda safe, T’Chaka kills N’Jobu, his own brother and father of N’Jadaka (Erik “Killmonger” Stevens). Killmonger is the film’s antagonist. Contrasting Oakland with Wakanda demonstrates that Killmonger is only the villain in *Black Panther* if we do not accept a connection between capitalism and racism.

Killmonger's story is familiar. As a child, his father was killed by someone who ruled totally and unquestionably. Killmonger was a part of the family lineage of this ruler but was cast aside and forgotten after his father's death. He works hard to make his way back to Wakanda to seek justice, not just for him but for those outside of Wakanda's borders. To do so, he must remove those who are in power and gain control of Wakanda's resources. While his character type is familiar, it is usually seen as a hero, not a villain. Think of Luke Skywalker, who's told that an all-encompassing and unjust authority killed his father. He wants to become a Jedi like his father but also bring justice back to the galaxy. This goal is lauded because Luke's body is already valued and allowed the privilege to fight for these reasons. Luke occupies a position where his actions are right by default and we must dig deeper to see any problems. Killmonger however, is by default the villain.

Every time Killmonger does something somewhat villainous, it is only because of the film's framework. Our first encounter with him is in the museum. He kills the museum curator and helps Klaue kill the guards. The dialogue Killmonger has with the curator frames this as an issue of property. The museum is in possession of stolen Wakandan artefacts. The curator, and those like her, are allowed the position of stealing and retaining these items, but Killmonger is not allowed the position of reclaiming them.

Once Killmonger defeats T'Challa in combat, he goes through the ritual to become the next Black Panther. He then burns the rest of the flowers that provide the powers of the Black Panther. T'Challa's sister, Shuri, steals one flower to give to M'Baku, the leader of the Jabari, before she knows her brother is still alive. Killmonger is meant to look malicious, standing in front of the flaming garden. Yet in destroying the flowers he destroys the possibility of a monarchical form of government to be continued past him. Shortly after, T'Challa confronts

Killmonger saying that he wasn't dead and never yielded, and he says that they are still fighting for the Wakandan throne, but Killmonger dismisses him. Most of the tribes that support T'Challa had initially refused to allow Killmonger the right to challenge T'Challa. T'Challa was recognizable, he had value and brought a sense of familiarity and comfort. Killmonger did not have this value. Instead, Killmonger threatened a sense of comfort embedded in the Wakandan system. He threatened the concept of how bodies ought to be valued. Killmonger removes any justification for Wakanda to hide from the world and remain comfortable while others suffer.

Everett Ross is one of two white men in the film. He is an American agent making a deal with Ulysses Klaue (the other white man) to receive vibranium for the American government. Ross's first encounter with T'Challa in the film illustrates that Ross really doesn't care about the rights of Wakandans but is only interested in attaining vibranium. Eventually, Ross ends up helping T'Challa and the Wakandans. However, it should be noted that, ostensibly, he is still able to receive vibranium afterwards. The source didn't matter so long as he received vibranium. Ross is almost never in any real danger in the film. He gets shot in the spine, but has friends that save him. During the film's climax, he is shooting down other fighters using a drone from a safe distance. While there is a close call while he is using the drone, his body was not placed immediately in harm's way in the same way as everyone else's. His body, his value, is never under immediate threat.

The success of T'Challa has everything to do with the privilege he was born into. He was groomed to be the next Black Panther to follow in his father's footsteps. He's avoided the trauma of diaspora that haunts Killmonger. As far as we know, he has very little experience with oppression or racism. This comes through being born in the privileged Wakanda. T'Challa has worked hard to succeed, but success was already granted. His environment prepared him for it.

In the end credits scene after T'Challa decides to share Wakanda's secrets with the world, someone asks what Wakanda has to offer. The answer is vibranium. Wakanda is seen by the rest of the world as a third world country, lacking any economic value. So naturally, the first question upon Wakanda's opening to the world is value based. What does Wakanda have that the world wants? Vibranium. The value of what they offer is projected onto the value of their bodies and T'Challa only becomes valuable through vibranium, something that Wakanda has attained by chance.

Therefore, Killmonger is the villain; he is not only Black, but unlike T'Challa he is also poor. His body cannot be equated with capital, he does not offer something of value and his body is therefore not coded as valuable. Instead, he is a threat to this entire system of value. It is Killmonger's quest for removing the connection between value and body that is the threat. To many who exist in the Marvel universe, it's uncomfortable. T'Challa comes to sympathize with him and this is the whole reason why he opens Wakanda's secrets to the world. T'Challa is trying to create change without a total reconstruction of this value system.

Black Panther is the most interesting Marvel film so far. We have a villain who isn't just complicated, but right. Chadwick Boseman has agreed that his character, T'Challa, is the enemy saying he was born with "a vibranium spoon in his mouth."¹ Science fiction can produce haunting commentary on contemporary events and social constructs. If *Black Panther* is doing this, then the world is at odds with Killmonger, resisting any further exploration of what he represents. To this end, I hope that if the sequel continues to illustrate the problems with Wakanda and T'Challa. Marvel is slowly moving in two new directions: its blockbuster heroes are (slowly) becoming more diverse and we're seeing a move towards social commentary (*Infinity War* probably won't count towards this). *Black Panther* begins to explore what happens

when these two directions inevitably come together. It means that we have a villain who is right and a protagonist who is unknowingly perpetuating injustice. It means we get to see how we value bodies.

¹ Eye Candy, “Chadwick Boseman Agrees: ‘T’Challa is the Enemy, Killmonger is Trying to Achieve Greatness.” <http://afropunk.com/2018/03/chadwick-boseman-agrees-tchalla-enemy-killmonger-trying-achieve-greatness/> (accessed March 19, 2018).

References

Eye Candy, “Chadwick Boseman Agrees: ‘T’Challa is the Enemy, Killmonger is Trying to Achieve Greatness.” <http://afropunk.com/2018/03/chadwick-boseman-agrees-tchalla-enemy-killmonger-trying-achieve-greatness/> (accessed March 19, 2018).