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The Semi-Anti-Apocalypse of Black Panther

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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Black Panther is unique among superhero films in many incredibly positive ways that are quite obvious—chief among them the fact that it is the first one with a nearly all-Black cast, including several women playing principle characters who help drive the narrative. It also stands out positively, but perhaps less noticeably, by refusing to fully reproduce the standard apocalyptic structure of most superhero films. These films typically include the key elements of biblical end-of-times narratives, particularly their violent moral dualism: the forces of good, led by a lone messianic savior, destroy the forces of evil in a cataclysmic battle.

An important element of traditional apocalypses that superhero films do *not* reproduce is their anti-colonialism. Biblical apocalyptic writings were produced by people suffering under foreign rule who imagined freedom from this oppression. Thus when the smoke clears after the war between good and evil has ended, the victors ultimately find themselves in an idyllic—and specifically post-colonial—world. The

book of Revelation, for instance, foretells how God's armada vanquishes Babylon, the symbol of the Roman forces occupying the land in which Revelation was written.

Superhero apocalypses do raise the issue of colonialism in various ways, but because of the political context in which these films are created their conclusion has a very different meaning. In 2008 *Iron Man* kicked off the current Marvel Cinematic Universe, and in many ways set an ideological template that the subsequent films have tended to follow. The plot is driven by a corporate colonial threat, as Tony Stark's company is illegally taken over by Obadiah Stane. The threat is overcome of course by Stark, the lone savior who evokes Jesus by returning from the dead in a cave in the desert, and striking a crucifixion pose every time he puts on his armor. He also, significantly, references both the Christian messiah and biblical colonialism when he hands an award over to a casino employee dressed as a Roman soldier and directly quotes Jesus: "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25).

At the end of *Iron Man* the world is saved and the evildoer, Stane, is consumed by fire. This narrative arc mimics that of biblical apocalypses, with the critical difference that, unlike the social situation in which those texts were produced, the makers of *Iron Man* and other superhero films are not themselves currently operating under colonial rule—they are, instead, settlers on Indigenous lands. And so when evil is destroyed the world of the film returns to one that is (more or less) like the colonized one in which we live, one in which people like Tony Stark really *are* in charge. The anti-colonial aspect of the biblical apocalypse, in other words, has been replaced by the hegemony of rich white American men.[1]

All of which brings us to Marvel's recent and extraordinary *Black Panther*. At first glance the film appears to contain several common apocalyptic elements. The plot centers on the takeover of Wakanda by an outsider, the American Killmonger, who launches an attack on the rest of the world from his position as the new African king. He is stopped by our hero T'Challa, pulling his own version of Jesus' back-from-the-grave trick. When the battle between the two enemies is done Killmonger is dead, the world is saved, and the status quo is reinstated. To the extent that it is apocalyptic, then, *Black Panther* arguably supports colonialism in a manner that resembles other superhero films.

A number of commenters—including Kimberle Crenshaw, Christopher Lebron, and James Wilt[2]—have similarly made the case that *Black Panther* is not quite the liberating film it is being hailed as by so many people. One of the key points in this argument involves the demonization of Killmonger. He is a staunch critic of colonialism, as he makes clear from the start in his remarks at a British museum, which he (correctly) accuses of keeping artifacts stolen from African communities. His final plan is literally revolutionary: arming Black women and men around the world with Wakandan weaponry so that they might rise up against oppression.

Killmonger however is presented in many ways as a misogynist and a sociopath, which grossly undermines the legitimacy of his concerns about Black enslavement and subjugation. As Lebron observes, "he lacks any coherent political philosophy. Rather than the enlightened radical, he comes across as the black thug from Oakland hell bent on killing for killing's sake."[3] Or in Crenshaw's words: "Black power has always been framed by its critics as dangerous, irrational, bloodthirsty revenge. Today's identity

extremists were yesterday's Panthers and Pan Africanists. How did that libelous trope come to be the central tension in this celebration of Black superheroes?"[4]

As a film made mostly by Black Americans, *Black Panther* mirrors the colonial origins of biblical apocalypses much more closely than other superhero movies. If it had followed through on this biblical aspect of its apocalyptic orientation the villains would have been actual colonizers, and the world at the end of the film would *not* look like the one we're living in. Instead our hero fights Killmonger, a man who resembles the filmmakers themselves, a man to be counted among the oppressed rather than the oppressors.[5] And the only notable difference between the film's world and our own at the end is that T'Challa is going to set up some special schools in the U.S.

Although *Black Panther* is definitely problematic in some respects, it may still be worth recognizing that there are several ways in which the film challenges standard superhero apocalyptic tropes, and in so doing undermines at least to some extent its own pro-colonial implications. To start, the title character himself is not really a lone savior at all; T'Challa is instead supported, corrected, challenged, and *saved* by other key figures, most notably Okoye, Nakia, and Shuri. He is also not uniquely messianic in the manner of heroes like Iron Man, Captain America, the Hulk, or Spider-Man, all of whom are the result of singular experiences. Unlike such *sui generis* heroes the Black Panther— whoever that may be, including Killmonger himself—is part of a heritage, a long line of Wakandan leaders who gain their special abilities through ritualistic ingestion of the heart-shaped herb.

Perhaps most importantly, *Black Panther* pushes back with some force against good/evil dualism. Killmonger is first of all not a complete outsider but is in fact

N'Jadaka, a lost Wakandan and T'Challa's cousin. He is also highly sympathetic in many respects including his origins, as he was essentially created by the negligence and isolationism of T'Challa's father, T'Chaka. When T'Chaka kills his own brother (and N'Jadaka's father), N'Jobu, after accusing him of treason, he abandons his now-fatherless nephew in America. N'Jadaka returns to Wakanda as a grown man, as Killmonger, full of understandable pain and rage.

As the (temporarily) rightful ruler of Wakanda, Killmonger also mobilizes T'Challa's own people against him and his allies. The final battle, therefore, is not about good versus evil but about two groups of related people fighting each other for what they believe is most right. These sides are represented powerfully by Okoye and Nakia, as the former vows to serve her country even if led by a man with whom she vehemently disagrees, while Nakia fights to save her country from that very man. It is a civil war that heart-breakingly forces Shuri to devise a plan to kill her own people, who are obeying their ruler by attempting to fly weapons out of the country. The battle pits neighbor against neighbor and, in the case of T'Challa and Killmonger, cousin against cousin. At one point W'Kabi, who was T'Challa's closest friend but now opposes him, confronts his partner Okoye, who has come to see Killmonger's reign as illegitimate. "Would you kill me, my love?" W'kabi asks. Okoye does not hesitate: "For Wakanda? No question."

The film's final deviation from the apocalyptic arc involves its depiction of T'Challa as someone who is not willing to defeat his enemies by any means necessary. When challenged for the throne by M'Baku, he presses his antagonist to concede specifically because he does not wish to kill him. This act of mercy is later repaid when M'Baku comes to T'Challa's aid. Their interaction is juxtaposed against T'Chaka's

killing of N'Jobu, which planted the seeds of vengeance in Killmonger. *Black Panther* makes the case that the world is morally complex, and that the destruction of one's enemies does not heal wounds, but causes them to fester and grow. And so in the end T'Challa stops Killmonger by injuring him gravely, but not fatally; he could still be healed. It is Killmonger himself who chooses death over incarceration, protesting colonial injustice even with his final words: "Throw me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped off the slave ships, 'cause they knew death was better than bondage."[6]

In the end the ambivalent apocalypse of *Black Panther* appears to result from, and help sustain, the film's many contradictions. This is a movie that implicitly supports but explicitly condemns colonialism; that critiques racism but perpetuates some of its clichés; that offers Black audiences "a celebrated view of themselves" while dividing Black characters "into murderous warring factions."[7] That said, there seems to be very little ambivalence in the film's *reception*. It has broken multiple box office records.[8] There are continuous reports of mass, celebratory viewings. Black athletes around the world are doing the Wakandan crossed-arm salute and tagging their successes #WakandaForever.[9] It appears that the joys of *Black Panther's* idealistically Afro-centric, Afro-futuristic vision are vastly outweighing any frustrations at how the film at times may fall short of that vision. This response may not be anything like the change in the status quo that Killmonger wanted, but in many ways *Black Panther* has absolutely started a revolution.

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[1] The colonialism of some superhero films is more overt than implicitly endorsing the current status quo. *Iron Man* itself shows Tony Stark invading Afghanistan and killing terrorists, and directly tells us that he was *right* to do so; in this way the film mimics and implicitly justifies George Bush's own reasons for starting intractable wars in the Middle East. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* actually critiques the American military-industrial complex, but only to the extent that it has been invaded by evil Hydra agents; otherwise it's perfectly fine.

2 Kimberle Crenshaw, "So...I've seen Black Panther twice now and I'm sure I will see it yet again." Facebook, February 18, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/kimberle.crenshaw/posts/10156138000853851: Christopher Lebron, "'Black Panther' Is Not the Movie We Deserve." Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum, February 17, 2018. http://bostonreview.net/race/christopher-lebron-black-panther: James Wilt, "How Black Panther liberalizes black resistance for white comfort." *Canadian Dimension*, February 21, 2018. https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/how-black-panther-liberalizes-black-resistance-for-white-comfort.

3 Lebron, "Black Panther."

4 Crenshaw, "So…I've seen."

5 "In 2018, a world home to both the Movement for Black Lives and a president who identifies white supremacists as fine people, we are given a movie about black empowerment where the only redeemed blacks are African nobles. They safeguard virtue and goodness against the threat not of white Americans or Europeans, but a black American man, the most dangerous person in the world" Lebron, "Black Panther."

6 The fact that Killmonger dies is one of Lebron's complaints about the film: "Perhaps Killmonger's main dream to free black people everywhere decisively earns him the fate of death." In contrast, he argues: "If one surveys the Marvel cinematic universe, one finds that the main villains—even those far more destructive than Killmonger—die infrequently." The particular example he gives is Loki, which is a fair point. However the MCU overall is in fact more often than not fatal for villains. By my count, of the 17 films released before *Black Panther*, in ten of them the antagonist dies (this list includes *Ant-Man*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Guardians of the Galaxy* 1 and 2, all three *Iron Man* films, and *Thor* 2 and 3).

7 Crenshaw, "So...I've seen."

8 As of March 19, 2018, *Black Panther* has the best pre-summer opening of all time, and is the highest-grossing single superhero film ever made despite having been released in North America just over a month ago; see Christopher Campbell, "Every Record Black Panther has Matched or Shattered." Rotten Tomatoes, March 19, 2018. https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/article/every-record-black-panther-has-matched-or-shattered. It is also currently the best-reviewed live-action superhero film, with a *Rotten Tomatoes* score of 97% for all critics, and an astounding 100% for Top Critics.

9 Matthew Dessem, "Black Athletes Have Started Celebrating Their Victories With the "Wakanda Forever" Salute from Black Panther." Slate, March 11, 2018. https://slate.com/culture/2018/03/black-athletes-have-started-celebrating-their-victories-with-the-wakanda-forever-salute.html.

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