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Black Panther as Spirit Trip

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Black Panther as Spirit Trip

Abstract

This is one of a series of film reviews of *Black Panther* (2018), directed by Ryan Coogler. This review analyzes engagement with the movie as a religious experience and considers some political implications of both its storyline and reception. In particular, the piece focuses on constructions of race, especially in relationship to Africa and African Americans, as well as practical tensions around commodifying dissent.

Keywords

Black Panther, Marvel, Race, Superheroes, African-American, Disney, Social Justice, Wakanda, Colonialism, America

Author Notes

Laurel Zwissler is an assistant professor of Religion at Central Michigan University, USA. Her new book, *Religious, Feminist, Activist: Cosmologies of Interconnection* (University of Nebraska, Anthropology of North America Series), focuses on global justice activists and investigates contemporary intersections between religion, gender, and social justice politics, relating these to theoretical debates about religion in the public sphere. She is now building on this work with ethnographic research within the North American fair-trade movement, as well as occasional visits with contemporary Witchcraft communities.



The record-breaking film *Black Panther* offers an encounter with alternative parts of the multiverse of which many of us, up until now, dared not even dream. As I demonstrate here, the movie can be put in productive conversation with the academic study of religion through analyzing engagement with it as a religious experience and considering some of the political implications of both its storyline and its reception. Before I begin my discussion, however, I want to be very clear: *Black Panther* means something to all of us, but, ultimately, I get it; as a white academic, this is *so* not about me. I'm just happy to be invited to the party.

In offering access to another world, *Black Panther* creates opportunities for what are pragmatically shamanic experiences, spirit trips to an Other world. This is reflected in the language many theater-goers have been using to discuss their plans around the film, invoking metaphors of transnational travel. Carvel Wallace has written, “. . . I am doing what it seems every other black person in the country is doing: assembling my delegation to Wakanda.”¹ In his

post-screening discussion, Regie Ugwe warns of spoilers, “If you don’t have a Wakandan stamp in your passport, please wait on the other side of the nylon barrier.”² The collective project of superimposing the sacred geography of Wakanda into our material world even extends to a solicitation from the New York Times travel section for a future feature, “Where Would You Go in Wakanda?”³

Wakanda is an African-American dream of Africa⁴ and as such represents the promise of a world where things are as they should be. Religious Studies polymath, J. Z. Smith, has argued that part of the function of ritual practice is to embody ideal models of how the world should work which can be recalled in the far-from-ideal messiness of everyday life.⁵ In my own work, I have investigated ways that marginalized people may use their religions as tools to sustain images of themselves as valuable and as agents within an everyday world of social structures that discount and demean them.⁶ *Black Panther*, in offering an ideal of a sovereign, unconquered African nation, populated with proud leaders of both genders, offers a model of an other-world in which people of color are respected, recognized as whole, given opportunities to do great things. It is a painful understatement to say that, in this time of overt racism at the highest levels of government, such models are deeply important counter-narratives.

However, by definition counter-hegemonies exist within hegemonic structures. Even as *Black Panther* flips the colonialist nightmares of its antecedents (e.g., *Tarzan*, *Heart of Darkness*, even *Return of the Jedi*⁷) it does so within pop culture frames that continue to marginalize and exoticize people of color. In this case the undiscovered tribe in ‘deepest Africa’ is isolated by choice and for self-protection, distanced from white-supremacist nations not because its citizens are technologically and intellectually inferior, but because they need *nothing* from white outsiders. Yet, as critics such as Brooke Obie and Christopher Lebron have elucidated, there is

something troubling in the construction of Wakanda's relationship to this outside world that the film, despite its efforts, cannot truly reconcile.⁸ That is, ultimately, what do Wakanda's isolation and advancement say about other people of color, and more particularly, African-Americans in diaspora?

The film struggles with a just way to acknowledge that the historical experience of enslavement and oppression has left deep traumas within communities of color around the world, and particularly in the Americas, without implying that those traumas are so irrecoverably damaging that they make members of the communities that experience them dangerous. The portrayal of Killmonger, as the only main, African-American character in the film, runs the risk of falling into settler tropes of the Noble Savage versus the unsalvageable barbarian.⁹ This narrative also fits all too well alongside loop-holes in diversity efforts that promote elites from abroad over members of disadvantaged communities in the US, as exemplified by the admissions practices at many of our own academic institutions.¹⁰ To put this another way, through an intersectional lens, we can see ways that the film deconstructs racism, yet does so through classism, positioning African-Americans as too broken to fulfill their inherited potential.

There is also the deep irony of so many of us flocking to give our money to Disney as an act of political resistance. I absolutely count myself as a part of this. When a student told me he hadn't managed to see the movie yet, I responded, "It's what we're doing in America right now." Still, this resistance is literally monetized. These days, Disney owns all its alterities: not only *Black Panther* and Marvel Studios, but Henson's Muppets, *Nightmare Before Christmas*,¹¹ Pixar, Lucasfilm, etc. As Khanya Khondlo Mtshali cautions of *Black Panther*, ". . . by conflating the film with the resistive efforts of grassroots activists and organizers, we risk disrespecting our radical traditions, which are increasingly being commodified by corporations whose interests

have are [sic] never been with the people.”¹² When we start directing our energies towards swaying corporations to produce more diverse princesses and superheroes, we have already accepted their pre-packaged representation categories as our lowered bar.

Yet this opening up of mainstream representation to include people of color, and explicitly women of color, also matters deeply.¹³ As the sham of receiving justice through our core institutions has so thoroughly been unmasked—racist and sexual violence are clearly perpetuated, rather than disciplined, by current legal and corporate systems—it is invigorating that so many people are choosing to bypass those systems and meet each other in the public sphere to get what is rightfully ours, to insist on alternative definitions of heroism and humanity. *Black Panther* is part of this process; it delivers an important, anti-racist worldview for which we can vote with our dollars.

Further, with indebted and earnest respect to Audre Lorde¹⁴ notwithstanding, in the religious realm, African Americans and other marginalized communities have been repurposing The Man’s tools very effectively for a long time.¹⁵ As Wallace writes,

The film arrives as a corporate product, but we are using it for our own purposes, posting with unbridled ardor about what we’re going to wear to the opening night, announcing the depths of the squads we’ll be rolling with, declaring that Feb. 16, 2018, will be “the Blackest Day in History.” This is all part of a tradition of unrestrained celebration and joy that we have come to rely on for our spiritual survival.¹⁶

This is the same subversive practicality that historically turns Catholic saint cards into gateways to the loa¹⁷ and reorients Jemima syrup bottles into representations of sacred Black motherhood.¹⁸ Even as fans pay their voting dollars to Disney, they do not give up the right to repurpose Wakanda and its heroes into their own, new worlds.

¹ Carvell Wallace, “Why ‘Black Panther’ is a Defining Moment for Black America,” *New York Times*, Feb 12, 2018, Accessed Feb 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/12/magazine/why-black-panther-is-a-defining-moment-for-black-america.html>.

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- ² Reggie Ugew, “Did You Watch ‘Black Panther’? Let’s Talk Spoilers,” *New York Times*, Feb 18, 2018, Accessed Feb. 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/movies/black-panther-spoilers.html>.
- ³ John L. Dorman, “We’d Like to Know: Where Would You Go in Wakanda?” *New York Times*, Mar. 16, 2018, Accessed Mar. 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/16/travel/black-panther-wakanda.html>.
- ⁴ Jelani Cobb, “‘Black Panther and the Invention of ‘Africa,’” *The New Yorker*, Feb. 18, 2018, Accessed Mar. 18, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/black-panther-and-the-invention-of-africa>.
- ⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward a Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- ⁶ Laurel Zwissler, *Religious, Feminist, Activist: Cosmologies of Interconnection* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).
- ⁷ Edgar Rice Burroughs, (*Tarzan of the Apes*. Chicago: A.C McClurg, 1912); Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 1899); Richard Marquand, dir., *Return of the Jedi* (Film, Lucasfilm, 1983).
- ⁸ Brooke Obie, “In Defense of Erik Killmonger and the Forgotten Children of Wakanda,” *Shadow and Act*, Feb. 17, 2018, Accessed mar 18, 2018, <https://shadowandact.com/erik-killmonger-forgotten-wakanda>; Chrisopher Lebron, “‘Black Panther’ Is Not the Movie We Deserve,” *Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum*, Feb 17, 2018, Accessed Mar. 18, 2018, <http://bostonreview.net/race/christopher-lebron-black-panther>
- ⁹ Ken Derry, “‘Like You Could read What Was Inside Me’: Genocide, Hermeneutics, and Religion in *The Wizard of Oz*,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 26, 3 (2014), 293-309.
- ¹⁰ Scott Jasick, “Who Counts as a Black Student?” *Inside Higher Ed*, October 9, 2017, Accessed Mar. 18, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2017/10/09/cornell-students-revive-debate-whom-colleges-should-count-black#.WdzeGWIysHw.twitter>
- ¹¹ Henry Selick, dir., *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Film, Touchstone/Skellington, 1993).
- ¹² Khanya Khondlo Mtshtali, “Black Panther is Great. But Let’s Not Treat it as an Act of Resistance,” *The Guardian*, Feb 15, 2018, Accessed Mar. 17, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/15/black-panther-resistance>
- ¹³ Danielle Radford, “Black Panther is Black AF,” *Screen Junkies: The Dailies*, Feb 25, 2018, Accessed Mar 17, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/TheDailiesByScreenJunkies/videos/10156090124852403/>
- ¹⁴ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 110-114.
- ¹⁵ Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).
- ¹⁶ Wallace, “Why ‘Black Panther’ is a Defining Moment for Black America.”
- ¹⁷ Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
- ¹⁸ Carol Duncan, *This Spot of Ground: Spiritual Baptists in Toronto* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2008).

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