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## Black Panther: Thrills, Postcolonial Discourse, and Blacktopia

Giana M. Eckhardt  
*Royal Holloway University of London*

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## Markets, Globalization & Development Review



## ***Film Review***

# **Black Panther: Thrills, Postcolonial Discourse, and Blacktopia**

## **Introduction**

*Black Panther* (2018) was one of the most commercially and critically successful movies of 2018. Its box office take globally was \$1.3 billion as of April 2018 (Mendelson 2018), surpassing iconic box office successes such as *Titanic*, and – at the time of this writing – was still growing. Its success has led Marvel to already announce that there are sequels and spin-offs in the works. It has been reviewed and critiqued widely due to its impact on popular culture as a film with all African-American leads, many of them female (see, for example, Bowles 2018 in this MGDR issue). Other insightful academic reviews have included ones highlighting the importance of gender and race for the film industry (see, e.g., Kerrigan 2018). In this review, in line with the focus of MGDR, I will focus on the film's relationship to markets, globalization and development. The film explores issues related to the balance of power between the West and the Rest (Said 1978) – Africa in this case – as well as current debates surrounding how much and in what ways countries should engage with and be tied to each other.

## **Background and Story**

Black Panther is based on a Marvel comic book series from the 1970s, set in Wakanda, a fictional African country which has never been colonized. Wakanda houses the earth's only source of vibranium, which arrived to earth on a meteorite and is incredibly rare and valuable, and which the rest of the world does not know about. The premise of the movie is that after Wakanda's leader, T'Chaka, is killed, his son, T'Challa, is expected to become the ruler. T'Challa is depicted as a regal character, and in the film, his speech and body language deliberately resemble Nelson Mandela's (Zeeman 2018). T'Challa is challenged for leadership of the country by his cousin, Eric Killmonger. For a while, Killmonger succeeds in taking over Wakanda, but eventually T'Challa regains control.

## **Tropes and Styles**

One of the key features of Black Panther is that the film is a modern, slick action movie, in the style that audiences have come to expect of blockbusters. This belies the typical movie set in Africa, which tend to feature appalling aspects of turmoil and conflict, such as *Beasts of No Nation*, or where white people arrive to save Africans from themselves, such as *The Last Face*. Black Panther, however, has a global,

cosmopolitan feel, going to exotic locations such as Busan, South Korea, which is where the villain of the movie, Klaue, is supposed to buy black market vibranium, with a key scene taking place in a casino, in a nod to the Bond films. Other Bond-esque tropes in the movie include a gadget room in the main laboratory in Wakanda, in which Shuri, T'Challa's sister who runs the lab, explains how the gadgets work and gives them to T'Challa before he leaves for South Korea. Nakia, T'Challa's love interest and an international spy for Wakanda, speaks Korean and no doubt many other languages. Klaue himself is depicted as a Bond-esque villain, who has a literal claw on his right hand. The main fight scene in the casino in Busan is kung-fu inspired, and the car chase scene through Busan is Bond or perhaps *Fast and Furious* inspired. Thus, we have a film where the heroes are Africans, being at home and in control in global settings.

## Wakanda

Wakanda itself is depicted as a vibrant society, in particular in the scenes of the capital city. Different factions of people exist within Wakanda, such as the mountain tribe who have chosen not to be a part of the technologically advanced society, and represent sticking with tradition. It is clear that Wakanda is a complex society, and the conflicts within it are not determined by white people or white problems. For example, the head of the mountain tribe, M'baku, who challenges T'Challa for rule of Wakanda at the beginning of the film, and saves him from being defeated by Killmonger at the end of the film, feels alienated from Wakandan society, demonstrating that Wakanda is not just an unrealistic utopia. Finally, while the King of Wakanda seems to always be a man, the head of the military and the fiercest warriors are women, as are the head of the lab and key spies, implying that gender relationships are somewhat balanced. For example, at the end of the movie, when T'Challa and his warriors win the final battle against Killmonger, the Wakandan men who lost kneel to the triumphant women.

Black Panther directly addresses issues of colonization. Wakanda is a country with unimaginable wealth and superior technology, which has been kept hidden from the rest of the world. The movie suggests that Wakanda's success as a nation is related to its never having been colonized by a Western country, as the rest of Africa has, reinforcing the postcolonial argument that it is the actions of the West which ultimately caused the lack of development in colonized regions such as Africa (Said 1978). Black Panther also directly addresses issue of globalization, as T'Challa and Killmonger have opposing views as to whether Wakanda's wealth and expertise should be used to help other countries, or whether it should maintain its isolationist policies. Indeed, this is the primary tension throughout the

movie. For example, Nakia, T'Challa's love interest and a spy for Wakanda, articulates the argument for why Wakanda should share its largess with the world: "I can't be happy here knowing that there's people out there who have nothing," (32:28). She goes on to advocate for providing aid and technology to countries in need and taking in refugees. T'Challa's best friend and Wakandan soldier/warrior W'Kabi articulates the other side, saying "If we let the refugees in, they bring their problems with them, and then Wakanda is like everywhere else," (33:47), echoing conservative rhetoric for isolationism and building walls to prevent others from entering. Like Nakia, Killmonger also argues that there are oppressed people in other countries who could use Wakanda's help, but T'Challa argues that he does not want vibranium to be used for weapons to wage war.

The movie inverts common center/periphery narratives within globalization discourses (Rodney 1972) by portraying an African country as having more advanced technology than the West, and having to decide whether to share it with/give aid to the rest of the world, and in particular the United States. In the end, when T'Challa regains control of Wakanda, although he has been an advocate for keeping Wakanda's expertise and technology hidden from the rest of the world because he thinks it will be misused by others, he opens an outreach center for children in Oakland, California, which engages in social aid and teaches Wakandan advanced technology to the underprivileged African-American children. This is significant because Oakland is where his rival and cousin Killmonger grew up, as part of the Wakanda diaspora, and thus giving aid in this way, from Africa to one of the most chronically deprived African-American areas in the United States, resonates strongly.

## Reverberations

When the film came out, the narrative of an African country being globally dominant struck a chord with many viewers. For example, Wakanda Forever, the greeting Wakandans use with each other, became a popular greeting among African-Americans. Amidst the valorization of a movie which celebrates black power, however, there were also discordant notes, and criticisms that it did not go far enough. Critics such as pop culture commentator Leslie Lee (2018) have suggested that the film is by and for white people, and its politics are fundamentally conservative. Russell Rickford (2018) argues that Killmonger is a villain through whom stereotypical tropes are reproduced, such as that African Americans 'can't go home again' to Africa; there will always be estrangement between the US and Africa (as depicted through the estrangement between Killmonger and T'Challa), and that African Americans are degenerates, as evidenced by Killmonger being portrayed as a negative character.

Let's examine these points further. To address the first critique, that the movie is made by and for white people, while the original comic books upon which the Black Panther movie is based were written by a white man (Jack Kirby), the film was written and directed by a black man (Ryan Coogler), and celebrated African American author Ta Nehisi Coates is writing the new Black Panther comic books. Additionally, the majority of the audience, in the US and globally, has been non-white (Huddleston 2018). The movie builds upon a tradition within and outside of black literature and film of creating blacktopias, where societies thrive beyond the reach of white supremacy. The blacktopia of Wakanda is similar to that created in the recent Chuck Palahniuk book *Adjustment Day*, in which the United States is divided into different regions based on race. The region created by and for African Americans is the most advanced, as they can finally utilize the superior technology they have had all along, originally from Africa, which they did not employ previously due to wanting to keep it from white people in the United States. Both of these examples of blacktopias challenge typical depictions of African countries being 'backward' and in need of aid from the West, and instead suggest that Africans and African Americans are superior when it comes to technological abilities, and the reason why this is not evident today is because of the violence inherent in white colonization and domination which has kept this superiority from emerging.

To examine the criticism relating to Killmonger, the primary villain of the film is not Killmonger, it is Klaue, a white South African who is the son of a Nazi war criminal; a literal representation of white supremacy. Klaue previously stole vibranium to make a bomb in Nigeria, and is trying to steal more vibranium in this movie to wreak havoc around the world. This interpretation of Klaue being the villain, not Killmonger, is supported by the fact that Killmonger is depicted as an activist, in a positive way at the beginning of the movie, but later we realize he is in cahoots with Klaue. Killmonger sells the vibranium he discovers in a museum to Klaue, but in the end Killmonger was only using Klaue, as he kills him when he is no longer useful. Throughout his character arc, Killmonger discusses how he had to participate in the United States' colonizing project by virtue of being part of the elite military and serving (and killing) in Iraq and Afghanistan. Killmonger is reflexively aware of what he and many African Americans are forced to do, even though they have been the victims of these violent colonization practices themselves, as African Americans make up a significant portion of the US military (Statista 2016). Thus, Killmonger is not a bad person himself, but rather depicted as a product of his upbringing in the US.

Additionally, the conflict between the two main characters, T'Challa and Killmonger, is not protagonist/antagonist, but rather

represents two different camps within the African American community – one advocating for a revolution using any means necessary, including violence (Killmonger), and one more pacifist, wanting change but only via peaceful means (T'Challa). These competing logics for how African Americans can better their position in the US dates back to the civil rights movement, in the strategies of Malcolm X compared to Martin Luther King, Jr. (Shakur 2018), although their views are not as diametrically opposed as often suggested. In addition to Black Panther, we can see the tensions between the peaceful and violent means of resistance in Spike Lee's recent film *BlacKkKlansman*, which focuses on the black power movement in the US, as well. Ultimately Malcolm X renounced violence, which Killmonger never does in Black Panther though.

In many ways, perhaps due to his military background, Killmonger imitates the colonizer (Fanon 1961). “The sun will never set on the Wakandan Empire,” (1:27:00), Killmonger says as he speaks about his desire for Wakanda to be a powerful nation. He also says, “I learned from my enemies. Beat them at their own game,” (1:36:03). The CIA agent Ross character notes Killmonger burned all the sacred heart shaped herb – the herb that allows Wakandan leaders to interact with their ancestors – because that is what he was taught to do by the US government. T'Challa articulates this internalizing of the colonizer's mentality when he says “You want to see us become just like the people you hate so much. Divide and conquer the land as they did,” (1:45:58). Ultimately, Killmonger is not so much an antagonist to T'Challa as a product of the colonialist regime in which he grew up.

Finally, T'Challa does not see Killmonger as an enemy; when T'Challa sees his father T'Chaka while under the influence of the psychotropic heart shaped herb, he tells his father that Killmonger should not have been left in the US and that T'Chaka was wrong to leave him there. “He is a monster of our own making,” (1:33:49). In the end Killmonger reveals himself not to be a bad guy; just a kid from Oakland who wants to live in the fairy tale of Wakanda. He says, “Just bury me in the ocean, with my ancestors that jumped from the ships, 'cause they knew death was better than bondage,” (1:52:55).

### **The white ‘magical negro’ and an end to isolationism**

The critique of the film that does resonate, though, is that – despite the organization's known conservative and oft pro-colonizer politics – the movie depicts the CIA as a benevolent organization, in the form of CIA agent Ross as an ally of Wakanda. The CIA being the good guys does not ring true in a movie which is so overt in articulating the harm that the United States has done as a global power throughout the world via its institutions such as the military. CIA agent Ross, who was involved in trying to stop Klaue from getting hold of vibranium, is depicted as

bumbling in the film, not as a dominant character. Indeed, it has been suggested that his character is a reverse 'magical negro', that is, a character whose only purpose is to promote the well-being of the lead character (Lyubansky 2018). It is made clear that Agent Ross is not needed in Wakanda (he was saved by T'Challa in South Korea and brought to Wakanda so he would not die of his injuries, as only Wakandan technology could save him): "Great, another broken white boy for us to fix," Shuri, T'Challa's sister, and the head scientist says (58:26). She later articulates his status in Wakanda when she reacts to him coming up behind her: "Don't scare me like that, Colonizer," (1:02:29).

Yet, at the end of the movie, during the final battle between Killmonger and T'Challa, Agent Ross ends up pulling from his past career as a fighter pilot to virtually fly planes which are key to making sure that vibranium does not leave Wakanda and fall into the wrong hands. Needing a white CIA operative, who has been mostly made fun of by Wakandans up until the end of the film, to help save them does not hold up. However, the only reason his virtual flying mission is successful is because Shuri is helping him.

The movie concludes with a scene at the UN, where T'Challa announces that Wakanda has decided to engage with the world. Speaking powerfully to current discourses, in particular as President Trump repeatedly threatens that the US will leave the UN and WTO, and the UK voting to leave the EU, T'Challa has the last word with, "Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth, more connects than separates us. But in times of crisis, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers," (2:47:00).



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