



WAKANDA FOREVER!



***Black Panther* has gained near-universal acclaim and a worldwide gross somewhere north of \$1.3 billion and rising. It has been a startling success for a comic book character who, only ten years ago, would have been a non-starter for a major movie franchise. There is no shortage of essays that could be written about the range of themes and theories in it. In this one, Giles Gough looks at how the film deals with post-colonialism, plural representations and Afrofuturism.**

Let's start by unpacking some key terms: 'colonialism' stems from colonising, the process of invading and taking over a different country and subjugating the indigenous population. European countries like Britain, France and Spain got really good at colonising far-flung foreign countries in the 16th to 19th centuries. With that came attitudes that are collectively known as 'colonialism' – the belief that native people were intellectually inferior, and that white colonisers had a moral

right to steal the resources and subjugate the local populace as they were 'civilising them'. In other words, trying to make them more like western European society. As Edward Said put it, 'Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others [...] that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort'. Said is also critical of the intellectual voices that then attempt to justify this process.

The process of 'de-colonisation' gathered speed in the 20th



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century and with it, many of the attitudes associated with colonialism began to be challenged. Post-colonialism, like postmodernism, refers less to a time period and more to a critiquing of a school of thought that came before it. Post-colonialism exists to question white patriarchal views with a particular reference to how they relate to race. Questioning the stereotypes associated with colonialism is important. As Chinua Achebe, a famous post-colonial writer once put it:

‘The whole idea of a stereotype is to simplify. Instead of going through the problem of all this

great diversity – that it’s this or maybe that – you have just one large statement; it is this’.

Modern producers of texts have sometimes struggled with representations of Black people. Some texts have sought to make characters non-threatening by stripping them of any of the idiosyncrasies of their culture. For the latter part of the twentieth century, it was enough to simply present Black people in the text to be seen as progressive, with little thought as to how they were represented.



Letitia Wright as Shuri and Angela Basset as Ramonda in *Black Panther* (2018)

Afrofuturism: 'an ability to celebrate African heritage without the burden of colonialism but also to be able to imagine a future where society doesn't seek to limit them'.

The sci-fi/fantasy genre has, historically, been an area where Black people have been under represented. For its first twenty years, *Star Wars* had only one major character who was Black. *Star Trek*, in some ways, blazed a trail in terms of representation when it came out in 1966, but it would be another 27 years before there were two Black series regulars on the same show. Similarly, many of the classics of the genre – *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Bladerunner* – have a largely white cast of characters. As Ira Glass from *This American Life* puts it:

'while there have been Black characters in sci-fi for a while now, they're almost never the protagonists. They're never the ones driving the action. And for so long...in so much science fiction, there were no Black people at all'.

It's possible then that one of the catalysts for the Afrofuturist movement grew out of a need for Black people to see themselves in a future setting. But what is 'Afrofuturism'?

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Janelle Monáe by Tankboy / Flickr

Singer Janelle Monáe is part of a new generation of artists exploring Afrofuturism



Photo: Film Frames, Marvel Studios 2018

Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic that can be found in art, music and literature. The film critic Clarisse Loughrey gave a useful definition of it when she reviewed *Black Panther* on *Kermode and Mayo's Film Review*. She defined Afrofuturism as:

'an ability to celebrate African heritage without the burden of colonialism but also to be able to imagine a future where society doesn't seek to limit them.'

Afrofuturism is not new, it has existed in George Clinton's music and Octavia Butler's science fiction stories since the 1970s. However, it is only recently that it has started to move into the mainstream. Outkast and Janelle Monáe are recording artists frequently associated with Afrofuturism and *A Wrinkle In Time*, released in cinemas last March, was a mainstream film that positioned a Black female protagonist in the central role of a fantasy film. *Black Panther* is a perfect example of Afrofuturism, starting with the setting.

Right from its creation by Stan Lee & Jack Kirby in 1966, *Black Panther's* fictional country of Wakanda has been a wonderful portrayal of Afrofuturism. A sub-Saharan African country shrouded in mystery to the outside world,

Wakanda has never been colonised due to its hostile topography. It is an isolationist country, rich in a resource called 'vibranium' (the most famous example of it being Captain America's shield). In the comics and the Marvel cinematic universe, it is the most technologically advanced country on the planet. It is possible that the concept of Wakanda appeals to many Black people because of the diaspora created by the slave trade. If a person is unable to trace their family roots to their country of origin, it is possible that the idea of a country where an African culture has never been suppressed may seem more appealing.

Now let's consider T'Challa, the eponymous Black Panther. Lee and Kirby broke ground when they created *Black Panther* in 1966. They managed to show that a black character could be just as effective as their other heroes who had, at that point, come from the same white, straight, all-American background. But in doing so, Lee and Kirby borrowed heavily from the stereotype of the 'noble savage'. The noble savage stereotype, as mentioned in Stuart Hall's 'Grammar of Race' theory, offered white readers a representation of black men uncorrupted by the moral failings of the modern world and

possessing an innate wisdom. While Boseman's portrayal does indeed come across as noble and wise, it is undercut with humour when we see him bickering with his little sister Shuri or trying to get his ex to stay in Wakanda. This humanises the character while filling him with aspirational traits. While the representation of T'Challa is overwhelmingly positive, it is important to remember that one single representation of an ethnic minority, that lacks depth or plurality, can be as damaging as a negative representation.

Erik Killmonger serves as the central antagonist to the film. However, there is something that sets him apart from most Marvel villains. Growing up in Oakland, California, Killmonger witnesses the systemic oppression of black people by the authorities. Consequently, Erik is motivated to support and liberate black people around the world from oppressive governments. He is understandably jealous of the liberty and wealth enjoyed by the people of Wakanda. His plan is to use their superior firepower to bring about revolution in countries where black people are oppressed. Ryan Coogler, the film's director, stated that they portrayed Killmonger like this in order 'to bring the energy of Tupac to a Marvel movie'. Tupac Shakur was a prominent rapper in the mid-nineties whose aggressive style mixed with radical politics brought him to fame. However, even his staunchest supporters would have to admit that there were aspects of his personality that were problematic and inconsistent. This complicated representation not only serves as a contrast to the positive, Afrofuturist representation of T'Challa, but also highlights some of his flaws. *Black Panther* is one of the few films where the hero learns a moral lesson from the villain. By the end, T'Challa has been inspired to share Wakanda's technology with the rest of the world, for altruistic, rather than destructive purposes. The decision to make Killmonger motivated by a different philosophy rather than purely evil intentions provides us with a plurality of representations that makes for a richer text.

Black Panther will, no doubt, be the source of academic discussion for months and years to come. Its post-colonial desire to show a plurality of representations for Black people, as well as bringing the Afrofuturist aesthetic into the mainstream along with all its hope and optimism is overwhelmingly positive. But when all the hype dies down, it will surely endure in the hearts and minds of a younger generation because as Roy Wood Jr. from the *Daily Show* put it: 'It's nice to have a Black movie that's not about slavery, singing or slanging dope...it's a dope ass movie.'

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