

Of decolonial imaginings in Black Panther

Muneerah Razak

Black Panther, directed by Ryan Coogler, demands examination as a utopian imagining because such visions are unavoidably political. They are tools through which we attempt to draft a just future.

As a fan of superhero movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), I was excited for Black Panther as it promised to be different on the basis that it had a predominantly Black cast directed by a Black director. It proved to be much more than I had to watch it a couple more times to let the themes and ideas in the movie truly sink in. The movie went beyond representation – the Black Panther movie was, for me, a contemplation of identity, responsibility, with themes of Black power and pride, Afrocentrism, Afrofuturism and the moral questions of Black nationalisms and fundamentalisms. It was refreshing to see a movie address very real socio-political concerns pertaining to Euro-American imperialism and racial oppression. Representation itself, without a larger thoughtful critique of injustice, would have been very superficial – see Wonder Woman.¹

It would be worth mentioning that the previous film released in the MCU was Taika Waititi's *Thor: Ragnarok*. Many praised it for its anti-colonialist message.² There was a discussion about the bloody history of colonialism and the exporting of universal values, seeking to violently reorder the world in a Eurocentric, racist vision. Waititi is of Maori heritage and ensured throughout the production of the film that the indigenous communities in New Zealand played a big role in the making of the film.³

With this as a stepping stone, Black Panther delivered and ventured into the decolonial (I argue only to a certain extent) – instead of only critiquing European colonialism, it critiqued the patriarchal/western-centric/Christian-centric world order with a manifestation of an Afrofuturist utopia in the form of Wakanda.

Before I go any further, I should position myself. Why is a non-Black person writing about the Black Panther movie? Is it even 'my' film to write about? The film is a pop culture expression of a movement. African Americans and Africans (though some have argued against this)⁴ exercised their agency to develop an entire fictional civilization. Black Panther is a superhero for Black people, by Black people. And this is exactly why it excites me so much.

A big part of decolonisation (not in terms of nation states, but in terms of the mind, epistemologically) is dialogue and relationality in global struggle. Although we can never compare the struggles and the level of pain steeped in history of African peoples and its

¹ It was a cruel and unusual irony that Wonder Woman, pro-peace and constantly speaking of justice for all, was played by a pro-Israel Defence Forces (IDF) actress.

² Han, Angie. 2017. Asgard's bloody history refuses to stay buried in 'Thor: Ragnarok', 08 Nov 2017. Retrieved from <https://mashable.com/2017/11/08/thor-ragnarok-themes-colonialism/#5z3UXMk9yZqx>

³ Kois, Dan. 2017. The Superweirdo Behind 'Thor: Ragnarok', 19 Oct 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/magazine/the-superweirdo-behind-thor-ragnarok.html>

⁴ Nyabola, Nanjala. 2018. Wakanda is not African, and that's OK, 14 Mar 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/wakanda-african-180313123713872.html>

diasporas, the experiences and lessons from slave rebel movements, guerilla fighters, the civil rights and anti-racism struggles serve to be beacons for colonised peoples of the Global South. It was so important to see a community, whose past has been deliberately and constantly rubbed out, to have their facial features, skin colours and hair types, their entire bodies dehumanised, consistently rise above with their everyday resistances and activism. One example of this resistance was this decolonial imaginative Afro-futurist movie, in the form of a Marvel superhero movie, in Hollywood, which is extremely notorious for its colonial and racist representations of Black people and African culture in films. It was so empowering and motivational for me as a young Brown Muslim woman in Southeast Asia. What possible decolonial futures could my community and myself conjure up based on my faith traditions, my subaltern knowledges and epistemologies?

This movie has been discussed and dissected in so many ways, and we are all here for it, but in this article, I will focus on how Black Panther was an insight into what the imagination can provide with regards to a decolonial utopia.

What is decolonial?⁵

From the Global South, African countries prominently have experienced the slave trade, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism, neoliberalism and globalization. Taken together, these processes are understood as coloniality (or colonial matrix of power). Coloniality⁶ supersedes colonialism, in that when colonialism ended and decolonisation of states were occurring, coloniality, as the logic of colonialism survived. It continues to affect our lives that are colonially constructed – concepts of modernity, gender, economy, power relations, government structures, education systems, faith traditions etc. the technologies of imperialism and the colonial matrices of power continue to exist in how we think, how we perceive ourselves, others, our languages, imaginations and epistemologies.⁷

With this premise, decolonial(ity) is an epistemic and political project that originated in South America. Decolonial epistemology,⁸ going further than critique, shifts the paradigm and location of thinking. Decoloniality means to detach from the overall structure of knowledge to engage in epistemic reconstitution. Reconstitution of ways of thinking, languages, ways of life and being in the world than that the rhetoric of modernity rendered obsolete/invalid. The failure of

⁵ This is a short summary, there is a deeper and wider discussion taking place that I am unable to insert here due to lack of space, such as what is the difference between decolonial vs post-colonial vs anti-colonial, and a broader discussion on modernity/coloniality.

⁶ Ramon Grosfoguel describes the world order to be a racially hierarchised, imperialistic, colonialist, Euro-American-centric, Christian-centric, hetero-normative, patriarchal, violent and modern world order that emerged since the so-called 'discovery' of the 'New World' by Christopher Columbus. And at the centre of coloniality is race as an organising principle that hierarchised human beings according to false binaries of primitive vs. civilised, and developed vs. underdeveloped.

⁷ Ways of being, knowing and thinking.

⁸ Mignolo, Walter. 2009. Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(7-8), 159-181.

decolonisation was that there was no question of the structures and production of knowledge and questioning of subject and identity formation that were implanted by former colonisers.

Decolonial imagination: Wakanda

Wakanda is a model of Black self-determination. Untouched by interference, colonisation and the slave trade, Wakanda showcases a country blessed with an inexhaustible supply of a mineral/metal known as vibranium, a valuable and indestructible element that crash landed from outer space millennia ago in the African region. The people are able to utilise their country's resources for their own benefit. This, along with Wakanda's history being undisrupted by violence and colonialism, makes it the most technologically advanced country on Earth. With this, Wakanda still poses as a third world country to the rest of the world, as part of its isolationist foreign policy stance, in order to keep the existence of vibranium a secret. Its isolationism was deemed as the key to success as they had a proud history, self-determination, being shielded from corrupt influences as well as ruptures of knowledge, being and thinking.

Wakanda presents to us a glimpse of where Africa could be without the histories of violence. To a certain extent, this vision is decolonial as Wakanda offers a subversion or redefinition of what modernity, development and beauty means. The consequence of European colonialism was that the communities of the global South were equated with the "primitive" and backwards, whereas the future will always be White and Western.

"Development" and "modernisation" often mean adopting white and western cultures and ways of being. Wakanda offers an Afrofuturist reimagining of a future filled with arts, religion, science and technology from a Black lens. It unapologetically celebrates the uniqueness and innovation of Afro culture. We see a futuristic country that is also steeped in ancient African traditions, social systems and Black identity. Wakanda architecture showcases uniquely designed buildings and houses; hyper-speed trains go above local markets that sell handicrafts; traditional jewellery can also act as holographic communication devices. The costumes of characters have been inspired by the clothing of real tribes and social figures across Africa. The government is headed by King T'Challa, who is of the royal family. In his tribal council, which resembles a parliament, are the representatives from each tribe: the River tribe, Border tribe, Mining tribe, Merchant tribe, and the Jabari tribe. Many have criticised that Wakanda supports authoritarianism and the monarchy, devoid of democracy. I argue that a different perspective can be taken: Coogler's image of Wakanda actually takes "democracy" or good governance, and subsumes and redefines from an African epistemology, taking into account the institution of the monarchy and tribes. Society was structured on tribal/family lines, similar to how tribes all over the world were organised – network of families were inevitably defined by a certain profession (e.g. one tribe was concerned with trade and another with construction). Division of labour was based on tribe rather than class. These traditional markers that have often been characterized by primitiveness, backwardness, and authoritarianism are exhibited unapologetically and presented with grace for a global audience.

Responses to Eurocentric colonial imposition: Black nationalisms

Despite all this, the problem with Wakanda is that it was isolating itself and staying blind and silent to the racism and exploitation happening outside its borders. This flaw of Wakanda was called out by “villain” Erik Killmonger, T’Challa’s cousin. He is the son of his uncle who went to the United States on a mission and stayed because he was moved and affected by the oppression that African-American faced. It is noteworthy to highlight that Killmonger served as a CIA operative that does not hesitate to shed blood and assassinate leaders around the world.

His life in America as a Black orphan faced with poverty, racism and oppression, sharply contrasts T’Challa’s who lived in luxury and full notice and confidence of his African history and heritage. Killmonger claims he “knows how colonisers think” so Wakanda should use their strategies against them. He reveals his intentions of helping the oppressed by inverting the racial hierarchy, through exporting Wakandan resources and weapons to War Dogs (Wakandan spies that are placed in every nation) all around the world. They will arm oppressed people to rise up and kill those in power. “The world will start over and this time, we’re on top”, Killmonger says.

The ideological conflict between T’Challa and Killmonger represents the tension and debates behind what it means to be a leader, what liberation looks like and what a decolonial response should look like. The main question is: how should Black people respond to a global world that is racist, systematically exploits, patriarchal? Killmonger poses a legitimate question: is it not immoral that an African superpower like Wakanda, with its monopoly on vibranium and advanced science, remained silent and turned away from millions of Africans? Killmonger’s stance, to liberate Black people all over the world, has sparked a lively discussion over whether he is a bad guy to begin with. Isn’t active rebellion and demand for liberation better than isolationism? Shouldn’t liberation be achieved “by any means necessary”?

Delving further into Killmonger’s stance, I argue exactly what Audre Lorde said: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”⁹ It does not mean that violence cannot/should not ever be used in the struggle for liberation, but violence should serve as a means, with much self-consciousness and compassion (see Fanon and Mandela). As a product of the imperial American military-industrial complex, Killmonger sought to reproduce coloniality with another racial hierarchy. As Fanon argues,¹⁰ violence cannot be an end itself. He stressed that mere violence, without a clear plan for decolonisation, would only reproduce the power relations of the coloniser, as what Killmonger already articulated.

In addition, Killmonger represents a type of misogynist in Black nationalism. We see him killing his girlfriend to get to Wakanda, and after he becomes king, he chokes an older woman who was in the herb garden. There is a disregard towards the women issues as secondary in Black liberation through his disregard of Black women. Black feminism has deep anti-imperialist roots

⁹ Lorde, Audre. 2018. *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*. Penguin Modern: 23.

¹⁰ Fanon, Frantz. 1968. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.

which starkly opposes Killmonger's vision of alternative empire – "The sun will never set on the Wakandan empire."

With the tension between Killmonger's vision and Wakanda's isolationist policy, we see typical responses to Eurocentric colonial imposition, as Grosfoguel argues, nationalism and fundamentalism. Nationalism provides Eurocentric solutions to a Eurocentric global problem. It reinforces the nation-state as a political institution and borders as fixed, making it complicit with Eurocentric thinking and political structures. Fundamentalism exudes an essentialist "pure outside space" or "absolute exteriority" to modernity. Wakanda and Killmonger's stance straddle between the two and reproduces a kind of coloniality – one that maintains privilege and the other reproducing the violent power structures.

Role of Women

This brings us to the discussion of how Black Panther put forward a liberating vision of women in Wakandan society. Black women of different skin shades, hair types and head pieces are celebrated. The varied physical representations normalises the different ways in which Black women can choose to present themselves. As characters that have not been colonised, Wakandan women exude a confidence where they do not have to conform to any beauty standard to be recognised as beautiful.

The strength and position of Wakandan women in society is not feared but revered by the men around them. Nakia is a Wakandan spy who is portrayed with a sense of poise, focus and agency. King T'Challa greatly admires her and she offers counsel and despite being her ownself, is always there to support him and his family. There is Okoye, a general of the Dora Milaje, an all-female military that protects the King. We see how T'Challa respects her position and involves her in many state missions. We quickly learn that T'Challa is surrounded, yet not eclipsed by a variety of strong, yet tender and unique women. We get to see T'Challa's mother, the matriarch, and Shuri, the princess of Wakanda and the STEM world. She basically developed the new Black Panther suit and the technology that allows T'Challa to actually be Black Panther.

These characters played an important role in society and everyone, men, women, youths, elders, were allowed to be in their power and position without any one oppressing or disrespecting the other. The female characters were all multidimensional and highlight different personalities and career goals.

Why it is not decolonial enough

With any discussion on decolonisation, the discussion of possibilities has to be accompanied with a critical eye. The most obvious fact should not be overlooked: the Black Panther is part of the MCU, a multi-billion dollar franchise, as well as, appearing within the broader tradition of Hollywood. For the generation of revenue due to the hype, as representation and diverse casts

are now the “in-thing”, Hollywood would allow the world of Black Panther to be black as long as the real world defers to white fragility.¹¹

When looking at the movie’s namesake, in 1966, there is the formation of the Black Panther Party for self-defence, after the big cats that don’t attack first, and only strike as a result of an aggressor’s actions. Initially, the group aimed to keep African American communities safe from acts of police brutality by patrolling neighbourhoods while legally carrying guns of their own, but the Panthers grew. Increasingly, they became very vocal in speaking truth to power – putting them at odds with the US government, which deemed the Panthers to be a communist organisation and enemy of the US government. Many political activists were jailed – their activism was punished for challenging existing power dynamics.

Wakanda is seen in a positive light when it moves out of isolationism to provide “aid” or to empower the African diaspora in America with its money, resources and technological knowledge. The end scene even shows T’Challa involved in international organisations that have arguably propped up, maintained and reproduced Western ideas of peace, human right and economic development. But what happens if King T’Challa/Black Panther challenges and critiques Western imperialism, White supremacy, the racist world order, capitalism etc? What happens if he challenges his superhero partners (in the MCU) for their imperialist tendencies, the CIA, S.H.I.E.L.D and Stark Industries? What happens when he challenges white-owned US and European conglomerates for their exploitation of Congolese diamonds, gold, Middle Eastern oil, Brazilian timber?

This brings up the idea of the “good” vs “bad” Black person (and this can be used for many other subalterns like the good vs bad Muslim being). The ‘good Black’ pursues moderate ends while respecting the law, order and hierarchies that have been set up, whereas the ‘bad Black’ is angry and violent. He is destructive and to be feared, locked up or put down.

In addition, despite calling CIA agent Everett Ross “coloniser” (which tickled many), in the end, he is portrayed as a well-meaning and ally of Wakanda. This seems to be inconsistent with the role of CIA in the real world – the CIA have constantly try to influence politics of the Global South from behind the scenes, possibly to pursue and priorities US imperialistic ambitions. One prominent example would be the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in newly-independent Congo. He became the first prime minister for a few months and then, was overthrown and assassinated – for fear that Congo would follow Cuba’s path. In 2002, former colonial power Belgium admitted responsibility for its part in the killing, US never clearly stated its role despite its long-held suspicions. A survey of declassified US government documents from the era notes

¹¹ Brown, Alease. 2018. Black people beware: don't let Black Panther joy mask Hollywood's racism, 13 Mar 2018. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/black-people-beware-dont-let-black-panther-joy-mask-hollywoods-racism-93095>

that the CIA "initially focused on removing Lumumba, not only through assassination if necessary but also with an array of non-lethal undertakings".¹²

Quoting Milton G. Allimadi's analysis:¹³

"If these African giants – Lumumba, Nkrumah, and Mandela – were alive today, what do you imagine they would think about a film that transforms a CIA agent into a hero on behalf of Wakanda an African nation, albeit imagined, of culture, high science, technological achievement and wealth?...This is akin to a fictional account of the FBI as savior of U.S. Black communities. After it's hounding of Malcolm and Dr. King and the destruction of Black consciousness organizations in the 1960s including the Panthers with COINTELPRO, who would buy this storyline?"

Despite these shortcomings, Black Panther is still a great starting point to continued dialogue and re-imagination of possible decolonial futures. Can we think beyond the current political international system to create alternative systems of governance and economic systems? How can Wakandan wealth be redistributed without subjecting it to exploitation? (This question is relevant to countries in the global south who have "developed" i.e. United Arab Emirates or Singapore) With thoughtful and insightful creatives like Ryan Coogler, we can continue to imagine more just and acceptable futures.

¹² BBC. 2016. Four more ways the CIA has meddled in Africa, 17 May 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36303327>

¹³ Allimadia, Milton. 2018. "Real Wakanda"--Battle of Adwa, Searching for Heroes & Liberators, and The Political Economy of Black Panther | Black Star News, 23 Feb 2018. Retrieved from <http://www.blackstarnews.com/us-politics/justice/real-wakanda-battle-of-adwa-searching-for-heroes-liberators-and>