

YEARNING FOR WAKANDA

Black Panther's Role in Building
the Cultural Influence and
Political Power of Black People

Curated by Adlan Jackson

A POP CULTURE COLLABORATIVE SYLLABUS

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INTRODUCTION

On January 29, 2018, Hollywood royalty descended on the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles for the world premiere of *Black Panther*. Head wraps, hijabs, dashikis, boubous, kanzus, and all manner of attire befitting African nobility was on splendid display. After the Obama era, as Jamil Smith wrote in [TIME](#), “perhaps none of this should feel groundbreaking. But it does. In the midst of a regressive cultural and political moment fueled in part by the white-nativist movement, the very existence of *Black Panther* feels like resistance.”

One year into a White House administration that openly and routinely denigrated African nations and people, Ryan Coogler and the film’s creative team defiantly reclaimed Black people’s connection to a fiercely creative, technologically advanced African Indigenous society. Releasing into a world punctuated by grief and outrage in response to the relentless killing of Black people by police, *Black Panther* infused public imagination with the equally potent forces of Black genius and Black joy.

This motherland was Wakanda, a fictional country untouched by colonization, where women lead troops into battle, Indigenous science and technology heals wounds, and natural resources are cultivated and preserved, not exploited.

Audiences all over the world have gravitated—clamored—towards the movie’s Afrofuturist storyworld, careful unraveling of familial bonds and trauma, and complex political discourse. Collectively, we discovered that we were yearning for this connection to home, to decolonized concepts of culture and self, to the prospect of a richly diverse and pluralist world where people from all walks of life could not only revel in the splendor but also reckon with hard truths, together. The film broke box office records; and at the 91st Academy Awards, it held the distinction of being the first graphic novel adaptation to be nominated for Best Picture.

Beyond industry acclaim, the film’s lasting impact was its ability to galvanize massive cultural forces, changing the narrative landscape in the U.S. and globally. *Black Panther* produced a watershed of creative expression among artists, journalists, cultural critics, social justice organizers, and fans. These audiences moved Black creativity to center stage and popularized the idea that Black and Indigenous people were powerful

stewards of just societies. In turn, *Black Panther* revealed the potential of a pop culture storyworld to invigorate racial justice efforts, enabling Black-led movements, organizations, and brands to build momentum and increase their support bases.

The Pop Culture Collaborative recognizes the tremendous power that pop culture storyworlds have in influencing cultural change. To analyze, harness, and build upon such power, the Collaborative has partnered with a range of field leaders, including Wakanda Dream Lab and the writer Adlan Jackson, to explore how philanthropy can encourage more expansive cultural strategies that transform Afrofuturist pop culture projects into catalysts for culture change worldwide.

Through this learning journey, we have produced “Yearning for Wakanda,” a syllabus that offers a range of resources and insights that illuminate the broad impact of the first *Black Panther* film and its role in shaping a collective consciousness. As we celebrate the long-awaited release of the sequel, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, this syllabus also invites readers to dive deeper into specific ways in which the film can continue to shape entertainment, activism, fandom, academia, philanthropy, and cultural criticism.

As Carvell Wallace proposed in an essay for [*The New York Times*](#): **“Wakanda is ours now. We do with it as we please.”**

Bridgit Antoinette Evans

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WHY SUPERHEROES?

The “Superhero” is Itself a Cultural Strategy

Superman was created in the 1930s by childhood friends Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. He wasn't the first comic book superhero, but it goes without saying that Superman remains the most iconic superhero of all time. It's relatively less known that the superhero from another world was created as a pluralist cultural strategy, responding to the oppression of Jews in Nazi Germany. Siegel, in a 1975 press release, reflected:

What led me into creating Superman in the early thirties? Hearing of the oppression and slaughter of the helpless, oppressed Jews in Nazi Germany, seeing movies depicting the horrors of privation suffered by the downtrodden... I had the great urge to help, help the despairing masses, somehow. Superman was the answer. And Superman, aiding the downtrodden and oppressed, has caught the imagination of a world. (Quoted from Andrae and Gordon 2010, 59)

SOURCE: [The Independent—Superman at 80: The Jewish origins of the Man of Steel and the “curse” that haunts the actors who play him](#)

FURTHER READING: [Christopher B. Zeichmann in Journal of Religion & Popular Culture, Champion of the Oppressed: Redescribing the Jewishness of Superman as Populist Authenticity Politics](#)

The history of superheroes as pluralist parables didn't end with Superman. Marvel pioneers Jack Kirby and Stan Lee have described their motivations in creating some Marvel superheroes as having been inspired by the Civil Rights Movement. In 1987, Kirby said this about creating the X-Men, a league of superheroes born with powers:

I made the X-Men part of the human race, which they were. Possibly, radiation, if it is beneficial, may create mutants that'll save us instead of doing us harm. I felt that if we train the mutants our way, they'll help us, and not only help us, but achieve a measure of growth in their own sense. And so, we could all live together.

SOURCE: [History—How Stan Lee's X-Men Were Inspired by Real-Life Civil Rights Heroes](#)

Further, writers have analyzed the political subtexts of contemporary superhero movies, including those in the Marvel Cinematic Universe that includes *Black Panther*. Comicbook.com's Jamie Lovett wrote in 2017 that “‘Thor: Ragnarok’ Is a Political Story About Immigrants, the Working Class, and Imperialism.”

SOURCE: [Comicbook.com—Thor: Ragnarok Is a Political Story About Immigrants, the Working Class, and Imperialism](#)

By the time of *Black Panther*'s release, Alex Abad-Santos wrote in *Vox*, in his analysis of the film's political themes:

Whenever a superhero movie comes out, part of the cultural reaction is to find the politics in its bones...

There's a strong desire to find what these stories about super soldiers, iron men, and guardians of the galaxy say about American life and politics—perhaps because of the way studios tend to blur out those details when translating the stories from comic book form. The most striking thing about *Black Panther*, then, is that you don't have to dig to find its message. Nothing is hidden. Director Ryan Coogler has created Marvel's most political movie yet, one that's unapologetically grounded in the jagged reality of black American identity.

SOURCE: [Vox—Marvel's comic book superheroes were always political. Black Panther embraces that.](#)

FURTHER READING: [The Undeclared—The man who put Marvel in the black](#)

BLACK PANTHER'S IMPACT: Wakanda in Our World

Within days of the release of the *Black Panther* film, we saw in real time how fan communities were catalyzed to take the vocabulary and iconography into real life. In *Black Panther* actor Bamba's op-ed for *The Washington Post*, about how T'Challa's journey in the comic as an undocumented immigrant in the U.S. mirrors his own, we see how right away the moral world of the film transcends the medium and is applied to our real world:

It was incredible to read the *Black Panther* comic, in which this year's biggest superhero is undocumented and has to grapple with that new identity. Representation of immigrants—documented or undocumented—in popular culture is sparse, and it becomes even more sparse when looking at the representation of black immigrants.

Inspired by the Black Panther, I became an ambassador for [Define American](#), an organization that challenges common perceptions of immigrants by urging people to “come out” about their citizenship status and own their identities as Americans, even without papers. The Black Panther's story has given us a rare pop-culture conduit for our mission, using social justice themes in the film and comics to [engage fans in real-world action](#) around race, identity, and immigration.

SOURCE: [The Washington Post—The world's most popular superhero is an undocumented immigrant](#)

The organization The Visibility Project framed its movie ticket giveaways as offering Black people “passports” to Wakanda, invoking the transportive quality of the world of Wakanda and pointing to its real-life impact in our world.

SOURCE: [The Visibility Project—Black Art for Broke Blacks: Passport to Wakanda](#)

HOW THE BLACK PANTHER FANDOM HAS CATALYZED BLACK CREATIVITY: A Conversation with Shawn Taylor

Shawn Taylor is a writer, scholar, and co-founder of Nerds of Color, as well as a senior fellow and frequent collaborator with Pop Culture Collaborative. For the Collaborative, he pondered the question, “*Why has Black Panther transcended both its comic book and superhero film roots and typical fandoms?*” In his article “*Black Panther Ignites the Next Generation of Fandom Movements*,” he also explained how the film and the fandom surrounding it catalyzed Black creativity to transcend marginalization in Hollywood. Shawn wrote:

With *Black Panther*, the rules have changed. We’re no longer just going to sit and wait until Hollywood studios deign to give us narrative crumbs. Things have changed because we the fans have mobilized to put Hollywood on notice. We’re watching, we’re participating, and we have the power to make or break what they offer us.

SOURCE: [Pop Culture Collaborative—*Black Panther* Ignites the Next Generation of Fandom Movements](#)

PCC’s Adlan Jackson caught up with Shawn in January 2022 and asked him some further questions about how *Black Panther* utilized creative strategy and how fans capitalized on the power of the film.

Pop Culture Collaborative: *What's your history with the Black Panther comics?*

Shawn Taylor: You were always rooting for [Black Panther], but no one was doing the character really well until the Christopher Priest and Reginald Hollins runs in the early 2000s. But it was like Spider-Man, because Spider-Man was the only hero that had his face covered, and the Black Panther did, too. So you could actually project yourself onto the character.

PCC: *Can you talk a little bit about the fandom?*

ST: The internet fundamentally changed fandom. We've had fandom back through Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and even before that, but once the internet came in and you had bulletin boards and social media, the very nature of how Black people connected with fandom fundamentally changed. There's that scene in *Do the Right Thing* in 1989 where they're gathered around the comic book, but back then there was no real way to metastasize fandom. And though Black folks have always been first in line for science fiction and horror movies, our representation when compared to our participation in those scenes was totally lacking.

PCC: *And at that time, was the Black Panther thought of as a big deal in the Marvel Universe?*

ST: It was a moonshot. It was a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon. He was like a C-list character. He was never really an A-list character in the Marvel Universe. And then with the advertising of the movie, when you see him on the Avengers that people are like, oh wait a minute. And then that's when the flood came in. That's when people start saying, okay, finally now, after a history of bad Black superhero movies, we have one being taken seriously.

PCC: *Don't forget about Blade [a 1998 superhero horror film].*

ST: Without *Blade*, there'd be no modern Marvel cinematic universe. *Blade* itself showed that a C-list character, a Black character, could carry a movie and start up a phenomenon.

PCC: *Beyond his simply being Black, what are the qualities about Black Panther that caused the movie to resonate so broadly?*

ST: *Black Panther* gave us cosmology, and gave us geography. It gave us language, all the things that were snatched from us in the slave trade. It gave us all these things that we didn't have and gave us a new way to see

ourselves, outside of the influence of white supremacy, and that is something we've never done. Even hip hop is a self-defense mechanism to combat the effects of white supremacy.

PCC: *The main villain could have been Klaw. What do you think the impact of the film's central conflict, Black Panther vs. Killmonger, has been?*

ST: Klaw, as much of a mustache-twirling villain as he was, wasn't that much of a real threat. Whereas Killmonger was: "We are the ones who made him." And now we have to reconcile our isolationist waves of what we created. Do we welcome him back or do we combat him? And I think that ideological struggle, the idea that we make our enemies, was a very powerful thing, and also touched on black masculinity and black mental health.

PCC: *What do you see as the movie's strategic ambitions?*

ST: Part of it was to have Black folks see themselves differently, to understand that we are a part of pop culture. We are both consumers and creators. I think that was something that the movie did really well to show with the embodiment of the Shuri character that science is ours too. We come from a continent that spearheaded so much of the science that we take for granted today. We just don't hear about it.

I remember being in the theater and when the jet is flying through the illusionary wall, and you see Wakanda for the first time, the amount of gasps in the theater, the amount of people holding hands, leaning into each other. It was unbelievable. And the other part where I saw that really got people sick was when T'challa goes to the ancestral plain, the majesty of it and the sense that though we have this whole high-tech thing, we still have our roots.

And we know there's multiple regions that we haven't really even seen. We haven't touched the surface of what Wakanda has to offer. We're discovering it all the time.

What was masterful about what [director] Ryan Coogler did was that he made enough space in the movie for us. The way the story was told, we became citizens of Wakanda. And that gave us the permission to take things out of the movie and bring them into the real world. Like, "Wakanda the Vote," "Wakanda Dream Lab." They said, damn the copyright. Let's just make these happen.

We had people at the screening doing voter registration, bone marrow registration, all these things, you know, sickle cell health, black kids in STEM. What *Black Panther* was able to do was to give us a point of galvanization.

We had so many people working desperately, trying to get an initiative done and when this popped off, they were like, hey, you know what, if we just go through Wakanda and we got brand recognition—and notice it wasn’t “Black Panther the vote.”

PCC: *What do you think people are evoking when they use “Wakanda” in that way?*

ST: Well, I think they’re showing that we embrace the future and our past simultaneously, and that there’s no contradiction.

And it’s also a place where you can kind of renew yourself without having to deal with the structures of this racist ass world that we live in. You know, think about your people regardless of the white supremacy. To me, that permission would probably be the best thing to ever come from the movie. People were empowered to tell their own story, and find their own audiences through social media, and give them products directly. You got people making jewelry, you got somebody who had a Wakanda cookbook.

PCC: *Is there something about Disney and Marvel’s approach to the fandom that allowed it to flourish in the way that it did?*

ST: I think Marvel’s hands-off approach was really amazing, because they could have cracked down like Paramount did with *Star Trek*. And they didn’t do that. They allowed for certain things to pop up because I think they understood what it meant to grow their brand organically. Without fans, you have no project. So [they basically said], Okay, your fun is just inflating [our] brand.

PCC: *What were some of the ways you saw creative strategy in the fandom?*

ST: I think Black folks who have always been in geek culture finally were like, oh, this is not just me. This is a way that I can go to my hyper black creativity for my particular Black boy vantage point without having to question whether or not I’m a nerd.

In Oakland we have a lot of street vendors, right? Every Black street vendor had a Wakanda flag as a way to symbolize, “you’re welcome here.” Now, to me, that was powerful. Like, really taking this copyrighted material and creating a village out of it. And how many people would do the “Wakanda Forever” salute? The salute actually meant something to people. Black folks are good at taking fiction and mixing it into the real world. From the Wakanda head nod to people buying the Black Panther Vans that came out.

PCC: *Black Panther is contained within this larger structure of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and it's kind of beholden to questions of whether Spider-Man will show up, or how it fits into the Avengers timeline. Do you think that perhaps Black Panther needs to go beyond that?*

ST: I'm of two minds. I think it would be taken out of the structure like when [the CW network] made *Black Lightning* [a 2018 series starring a Black superhero] not part of the regular [DC Extended Universe] on TV. It was like, why would you do that? But then it also allows freedom from continuity and freedom from some of the superstructures.

But I think *Black Panther* deserves to be part of the [Marvel Cinematic Universe] and it should have the same amount of respect that they're giving other properties. We've had three Spider-Man movies with Tom Holland in the time we've only had one *Black Panther* film. We had comics and short story collections and we had a podcast and things like that.

But the reality is we're still going off the movie from four years ago. Honestly, I don't know how much more people are really going to be willing to wait for it. It's unbelievable what they've done, but you can't wait four years to do another *Black Panther* film. Like, come on. I'll be perfectly honest. I don't think the powers that be at Disney thought *Black Panther* was going to be as big as it was.

PCC: *Any final thoughts?*

ST: Wakanda is only going to be Wakanda for as long as people can find their way into it. If it becomes more restrictive, if it becomes less about the place and more about the larger Marvel universe, I don't think the fandom will be as engaged as it has been.

MARKETING, AND A MOVEMENT

The creation of the *Black Panther* phenomenon required a strategic marketing push. *The Hollywood Reporter* describes Disney's activation of Black leaders from within their ranks to create an organic bubble of hype:

Disney also quietly supported a grassroots movement raising money for kids to see the movie by helping with screenings when it could. Numerous actors, including Brie Larson, who stars in Marvel's upcoming *Captain Marvel*, joined the effort. Others in the Disney stable also became ambassadors for *Black Panther*, including Oprah Winfrey, star of the studio's *A Wrinkle in Time* (March 9), and that film's director, Ava DuVernay.

"They promoted *Black Panther* both broadly like a blockbuster and deeply like a passion project," says AMC Theatres Executive VP and Chief Content and Programming Officer Elizabeth Frank.

The Hollywood Reporter, in an interview with Disney marketing executive VP Asad Ayaz, quotes Ayaz as saying, "The biggest thing for the campaign was really super-serving black moviegoers while also making it the broadest moviegoing event."

SOURCE: [The Hollywood Reporter—Disney's *Black Panther* Playbook: A Peek at the Marketing of a Phenomenon](#)

Authenticity was key to the film's marketing, according to Robert H. Smith School of Business's marketing professor Henry C. Boyd III. "If you are very selective about your target market," Boyd says, "and you have a great product, and you win over that target audience, they will tell other people. They become your acolytes. And that's what happened here."

SOURCE: [Robert H. Smith School of Business—*Black Panther* Isn't Just a Great Movie: It's Great Marketing](#)

And in the end, the most important part of *Black Panther*'s marketing was the content of the film itself, the team that produced it, and how it mirrored the values of its audience, argues Jeff Beer in *Fast Company*.

SOURCE: [Fast Company—The Best Marketing For *Black Panther* Was Making *Black Panther*](#)

A SUPERHERO MOVIE WITH POLITICAL IMPACT

Even in an environment of superhero movies with political implications, it's been striking how activist communities have responded to the ideas and narratives contained in the *Black Panther* movie and have harnessed the energy and impact of the film's release.

As Shawn Taylor mentioned, the #WakandaTheVote initiative developed by Jessica Byrd, Kayla Reed, and Rukia Lumumba of the Electoral Justice Project/ Movement For Black Lives was one of many political initiatives that built on energy and activation among Black communities at the time of the film's launch:

SOURCE: [Vox— #WakandaTheVote: how activists are using Black Panther screenings to register voters](#)

Henry Jenkins of the University of Southern California's Civic Imagination Project further expands on why a superhero film of all things had the potential for leaving a lasting impact on civic imagination:

In numerous ways, superhero blockbusters offer resources for social movements: because they are ordinary; because they can be appropriated and transformed so freely; because they constitute a realm where we might imagine alternatives to current social conditions; because they foster shared desires that may help sustain struggles for social justice; because they speak about feelings that might not be expressed in any other way; and because they may bridge cultural divides. Certainly, other stories—religious narratives, folk tales, historical epics—also perform some of these functions. But for many young people around the world, as our example of *Black Panther* illustrates, popular narratives are particularly valued as resources for civic imagination.

FURTHER READING: [Henry Jenkins—What *Black Panther* Can Teach Us About the Civic Imagination](#)

In New York, a group of Black nonprofit professionals created Nonprofit Wakanda Quarterly, asking what New York City would look like if centered around Black communities and protected prosperous Black futures as depicted as existing in Wakanda.

SOURCE: [Nonprofit Wakanda Quarterly](#)

The implications of this type of fandom are profound. To further ground these insights in research, Pop Culture Collaborative conducted an original research project exploring the values of The Wakandans, fans of *Black Panther*. Researchers found that *Black Panther* fans are uniquely pluralist, and that the fandom community around the movie is strongly intergenerational and cross-cohort, and deeply dedicated to social and political issues.

Case Study *Black Panther* Origin Story

1 BORN INTO AN AFRICAN SOCIETY OF DIVERSE TRIBAL CLANS, ISOLATED BUT WITH SECRET PRESENCE THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

2 (COMICS ONLY) MOTHER NYAMI DIED GIVING BIRTH TO HIM, BLAMED FOR HER DEATH BY HIS ELDER BROTHER HUNTER

3 (COMICS ONLY) SENT OUT TO THE WORLD ON "WAKABOUT" TO LEARN OF OTHER PEOPLES

4 TRAINED AS LEADER OF WAKANDA'S UNDERCOVER OUTSIDE WORLD TEAM, TRAVELING THE WORLD TO PROTECT WAKANDA'S INTERESTS AND DEFEND ITS SECRETS

5 DEATH OF T'CHAKA, ASSUMPTION OF THRONE, NEW IDEA IN WHICH IT STRUGGLE WITH HIS COUSIN ERIC KILLMONGER

6 LEADS WAKANDA INTO A PLURALISTICALLY ENGAGES WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD RATHER THAN HIDING FROM IT, GIVING ITS TECHNOLOGY TO HELP AND HEAL

PRE-BIRTH | EARLY YEARS | CHILDHOOD & ADOLESCENCE | YOUNG ADULTHOOD | ADULTHOOD

Takeaways: Key themes within *Black Panther* fan culture

Black Panther fandom is unique among the fan cultures. It is strongly intergenerational and cross-cohort, deeply connected to political and social causes, and manifests almost uniformly pluralist traits, except in circumstances when the fandom has been motivated to push back against external abuse.

PLURALIST			TOXIC	
Imbed values around heroism and humanitarianism mirrored by the fandom	Encourages expression of diverse perspectives	Expressions of fandom don't live solely online, but also manifested in the real world	Connecting through costume, artifacts, and symbolism as a rather than shared beliefs	Rejecting unpopular opinions and beliefs that go against the collective
Embracing Empathy; Embracing Difference	Prioritizing Equity; Tolerating Nonconformity	Prioritizing Equity; Embracing Empathy	Assuming Commonality; Embracing Empathy	Adhering to Canon; Enforcing Standards

Source: sdn '19 Cultural Intelligence System

The Fan Journey

Black Panther fans emerged onto the cultural landscape and quickly became a dominant voice in the pop culture conversation, particularly where race, diversity, culture, and identity are concerned.

Year	Event	Impact
2017 Oct - Dec	Stan Lee Backlash	Fans are ecstatic with Marvel's release of the <i>Black Panther</i> trailer.
2017	A record-breaking debut	The release of <i>Black Panther</i> breaks some of the most diverse crowds in history.
2018 Feb	Wakanda Cultural Influence	During NYFW, Marvel teamed up with several designers and makeup artists to create a fashion show.
2018 Apr - Jun	#Black Panther Challenge	The GoFundMe campaign raised over \$30K to enable children to see the movie for free.
2018 Jul - Sept	WakandaCon	Over 2,000 <i>Black Panther</i> fans attended the first-ever WakandaCon, created by Ali and David Barthwell.
2018 Oct - Dec	CIA Oscars	Fans engaged in a series of bizarre tweets about BP and Wakandan technology during the Oscars.
2019 Jan - Mar	BP Wins at the 2019 Oscars	Rumé E. Carter and Hannah Beachler — not best costume and best production design awards.
2019 Apr - Jun	Marvel commits to diversity	Following <i>Avengers: Endgame</i> , Marvel says normalizing diversity will be its focus.
2019 Jul - Today	San Diego Comic-Con	Panelists discussed the psychology of <i>Black Panther</i> , Wakanda, and the power of comic books.

Source: sdn '19 Cultural Intelligence System

THE AUDIOVISUAL WORLD OF WAKANDA

The Visual World

The transportive, immersive quality of *Black Panther* could not have been possible without the award-winning work of production designer Hannah Beachler. In an interview with *Variety*, Beachler explains the intricateness of Wakanda’s visual world on screen, saying, “You just keep getting more detailed and more pinpointed in where you want everything to be, because you’re really building a whole civilization.”

SOURCE: [Variety—*Black Panther* Production Designer Had to Blend Fantasy and Reality](#)

The Music

Both the film’s soundtrack and its score also contributed to the immersive quality of Wakanda, blending African and African-American influences to create a cross-diasporan musical dialogue.

FURTHER READING: [CNN—Kendrick Lamar’s *Black Panther* album is a hit—and it could change the music industry](#)

FURTHER READING: [Sheldon Pearce, Pitchfork—How *Black Panther* Composer Ludwig Göransson Found the Sound of Wakanda](#)

The Fashion

In a feature for *TIME*, “The Revolutionary Power of *Black Panther*,” between interviews with the film’s cast, Jamil Smith discusses the revolution this audiovisual paradigm shift has wrought:

The invitation to the *Black Panther* premiere read “Royal attire requested.” Yet no one showed up to the Dolby Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard on Jan. 29 looking like an extra from a British costume drama. On display instead were crowns of a different sort—ascending head wraps made of various African fabrics. Oscar winner Lupita Nyong’o wore her natural hair tightly wrapped above a resplendent bejeweled purple gown. Men, including star Chadwick Boseman and [director] Coogler, wore Afrocentric patterns and clothing, dashikis and boubous. Co-star Daniel Kaluuya, an Oscar nominee for his star turn in *Get Out*, arrived wearing a kanzu, the formal tunic of his Ugandan ancestry.

“You might say that this African nation is fantasy,” says Boseman, who portrays T’Challa in the movie. “But to have the opportunity to pull from real ideas, real places, and real African concepts, and put it inside of this idea of Wakanda—that’s a great opportunity to develop a sense of what that identity is, especially when you’re disconnected from it.”

SOURCE: [Jamil Smith, TIME—“The Revolutionary Power of *Black Panther*”](#)



Ruth Carter's Academy Award-winning costume design for *Black Panther*, infused the futuristic designs that populated the film with historical and cultural touchpoints. In an interview with *the New York Times*, Carter said, ***"If you see somebody wearing a beautiful cloth, not only does that cloth protect their body, but it also tells the story of their culture and their history, written on the fabric."***

SOURCE: [The New York Times - The Afrofuturistic Designs of 'Black Panther'](#)





Ruth Carter’s costuming in the *Black Panther* film was accentuated as part of the film’s marketing with a 2018 New York Fashion Week show that celebrated Wakandan fashion. Fashion houses Cushnie et Ochs, Ikiré Jones, Tome, Sophie Theallet, Fear of God, Chromat, and Laquan Smith all contributed original designs.

SOURCE: [The Cut—For One Night, Wakanda Was Real: The *Black Panther* NYFW show was spectacular.](#)



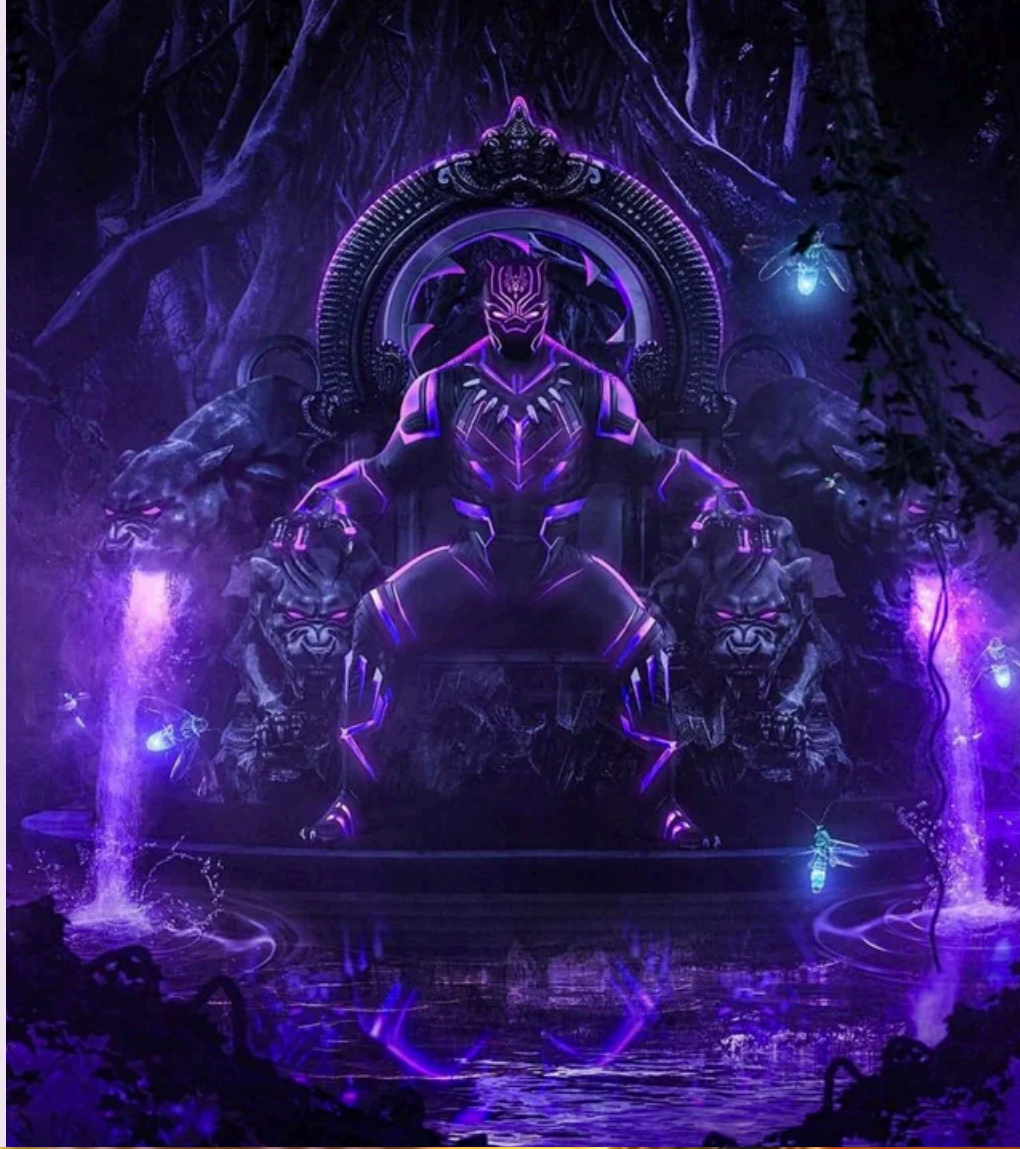
The impact of this visual design could be seen at local premieres of the film, where, as ABC 7 News reported, moviegoers showed up not only in cosplay, but in traditional African and African-inspired outfits for their appointment with Wakanda:

“Since Thursday, excited moviegoers all over the country have showed up decked out in traditional African garb in an homage to Wakanda, the fictional nation in eastern Africa where the film is set.”

SOURCE: [ABC 7 News—See the dazzling African-inspired fashion fans wore to *Black Panther* premieres](#)

The Fan Art

In addition to fashion, the world of Wakanda seeded inspiration in a number of fan artists, who created thousands of fan fiction works on sites like Wattpad and Archive of Our Own, and countless works of fanart on the internet and social media. Perusing any fanart hashtag or search, it's easy to see the impact the film's visuals and costumes had on these artists.



The Fan Fiction

Delving even more deeply into how the *Black Panther* story resonates with immigration struggles, Wakanda Dream Lab curated an anthology of original works of poetry and fan fiction on the topic, *Black Freedom Beyond Borders: A Wakanda Immigration Anthology*. Check out, for example, “Wakanda Dreaming,” Rufaro Gwarada’s story about opening Wakanda to refuge-seekers from around the world, on page 47.

FURTHER READING: [Wakanda Dream Lab—Black Freedom Beyond Borders: A Wakanda Immigration Anthology](#)

The Viewing Guide

In February of 2018, Terry Marshall, Aisha Shillingford, Rufaro Gwarada, and Calvin Williams of Wakanda Dream Lab published “How to Watch Black Panther,” the Lab’s viewing guide to help fans connect the film’s themes, characters, and storylines to social issues percolating across American society:

Because of its setting in a wealthy African nation that was never colonized and enjoys indigenous sovereignty, we can look at *Black Panther* as a blueprint for Black Liberation, which begets liberation for all.



With the concept of *Black Panther* as a blueprint, the viewing guide prompts us with questions to ask ourselves while watching the film. Here are a few of their questions, and you can read the full list along with prompts informed by the comic book lore at the link below.

What does governance look like that allows for the thriving of our people? What types and levels of participation in decision-making would there be in your ideal Wakanda? Consider who would participate in decision-making accounting for age, gender, etc.

The world is increasingly interconnected such that crises in one place typically have a ripple effect and reach other far-flung places. What could it look like for Wakanda to welcome and be a home for both African and non-African people seeking refuge from war, natural and human-made disasters, persecution, and other hardships in their nations?

What does it look like for leaders of Wakanda to hold space for political dissent/disagreement with outcomes that uphold the humanity of all?

SOURCE: [Wakanda Dream Lab—*Black Panther* Viewing Guide](#)

CULTURAL CRITICISM

Because of the film’s grappling with relevant sociopolitical themes, the release of *Black Panther* catalyzed a round of discourse about Blackness, utopianism, and how Wakanda reflects on our world. Jelani Cobb writes in *The New Yorker* and Aisha Harris in *Slate*:

On Gorée Island [in Senegal], I patiently listened to the guide’s argument, before pointing out to her that we were conducting our conversation in English, in a building constructed by the French, in a country that had been a colony of France, and that the issue was not whether black Americans retained any connection to Africa but whether history had left anyone on the continent still in a position to pass judgment on that question. Superheroes are seldom tasked with this kind of existential lifting, but that work is inescapable in the questions surrounding Wakanda and the politics of even imagining such a place. Marvel has made a great many entertaining movies in the past decade, but Ryan Coogler has made a profound one.

SOURCE: [Jelani Cobb, *The New Yorker*—*Black Panther* and the Invention of “Africa”](#)

Just as Wakanda is a utopian symbol for black people in its depiction of a nation relatively untouched by colonialism, so does it now represent an ideal world in which men and women coexist respectfully, on an equal playing field.

SOURCE: [Aisha Harris, *Slate*—*Black Panther’s* Feminism Is More Progressive Than *Wonder Woman’s*](#)

Together, the hundreds of published essays and film reviews generated by cultural critics during the first months of released created a fulcrum of complex, heady discourse about Black identity, African American connection to homeland, generational trauma, and pathways to decolonized Black life.

THE GAME, CHANGED

In a feature in *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, “Revenge of the Blerds,” Adam Bradley interviews creatives about the impact *Black Panther* is having in Hollywood and how it has catalyzed a new class of Black storytellers:

If there wasn't a *Black Panther*, we would not have had a *Watchmen*; if there wasn't a *Watchmen*, they would have never given a Black woman millions of dollars to create the HBO show that was *Lovecraft Country*.

There's nothing wrong with escapism, and there's nothing wrong with using science fiction and fantasy as self-care. Having moments of happiness and joy in between pain. That's us. That's part of our culture.

Black audiences have long had to project themselves into white stories. Whiteness was the default, and Black stories were thought to be compelling only to Black people themselves, or to white audiences seeking a voyeuristic glimpse into an unknown territory. What's happening now is something different: the ordinary, everyday capacity of assuming that the particulars of Black lives can—and must—be understood as universal, too.”

SOURCE: [*T: The New York Times Style Magazine: Revenge of the Blerds*](#)

In Canada, CBC interviewed Toronto youth about what *Black Panther* means to them, illustrating the impact the film is having on the next generation of Black fans and creators:

SOURCE: [*Black Panther: For black youth, more than a superhero movie*](#)

And in Senegal, singer Akon has invested in creating a futuristic city modeled after Wakanda:

SOURCE: [*CNN—R&B singer Akon is building a 'real-life Wakanda' worth \\$6 billion in Senegal*](#)

THE NEXT PHASE OF THE LEARNING JOURNEY

As we've discovered in the preceding pages, it's clear that the creativity of the filmmakers has been matched by the creativity of their audience, the cultural strategy field, and social justice movements. From fan art to fashion, from civic discourse to cultural strategy, *Black Panther* has supplied a wellspring of resources for the public imagination. The ideas outlined in this syllabus are just the start. To return to the words of Carvell Wallace: **“Wakanda is ours now. We do with it as we please.”**

About the Author

Adlan Jackson is a writer, researcher, and producer interested in how power shapes performance. He has written critically on culture and the arts for outlets like The New York Times Magazine, where he wrote about concerts on film and social media, as well as for Pitchfork, Hyperallergic, and more. He has also written reported features for outlets like The New Yorker and Paper magazine, where he covered copyright claims against DJs streaming their sets in the pandemic. His research portfolio includes work for New York University, the American Civil Liberties Union, and The High Line, for which he produced a podcast about surveillance and drone technology, interviewing victims of drone violence from New York to Yemen. In 2020, he was named a National Critics Institute fellow at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center. He also runs a blog where he writes critically about nightlife and live music, called Critical Party Studies, which in 2021 was awarded a New York City Artist Corps Grant by the New York Foundation for the Arts. Adlan graduated from Princeton University in 2015 with a bachelor’s degree in public policy. He is from Kingston, Jamaica, and is based in New York.

The Pop Culture Collaborative

The Pop Culture Collaborative is a philanthropic resource and funder learning community working to transform the narrative landscape in America around Black and Indigenous peoples, people of color, immigrants and refugees, and Muslim peoples, especially those who are women, queer, trans, nonbinary, and/or disabled. The Collaborative supports the growth of the pop culture for social change field through four interconnected program areas: grantmaking, convening and networking, narrative design and philanthropic learning.

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Page 17 | Photo of Ryan Coogler: Alberto E. Rodriguez/Getty Images for Disney; Photo of Lupita Nyong’o: Getty Images; Costume design sketch for Nakia: Ruth E. Carter and Keith Christensen; Photo of Lupita Nyong’o and Chadwick Boseman: Matt Kennedy/Marvel and Disney

Page 18 | Chromat Fashion Show: Tolu Aremu; Ekiré Jones Fashion Show: Ekiré Jones; Photo of Meisha Robinson and friends attend a screening of “Black Panther” by Meisha Robinson via ABC 7 Chicago

Page 19 | Top: Original Art by [@Bosslogic](#); Bottom: Original Art by [Yadvender Singh Rana](#)

Page 20 | Cover of Wakanda Dream Lab’s “Black Panther Viewing Guide”