

FEATURE

# Why 'Black Panther' Is a Defining Moment for Black America

Ryan Coogler's film is a vivid re-imagination of something black Americans have cherished for centuries — Africa as a dream of our wholeness, greatness and self-realization.

By Carvell Wallace

Feb. 12, 2018

**T**he Grand Lake Theater — the kind of old-time movie house with cavernous ceilings and ornate crown moldings — is one place I take my kids to remind us that we belong to Oakland, Calif. Whenever there is a film or community event that has meaning for this town, the Grand Lake is where you go to see it. There are local film festivals, indie film festivals, erotic film festivals, congressional town halls, political fund-raisers. After Hurricane Katrina, the lobby served as a drop-off for donations. We run into friends and classmates there. On weekends we meet at the farmers' market across the street for coffee.

The last momentous community event I experienced at the Grand Lake was a weeknight viewing of "Fruitvale Station," the 2013 film directed by the Bay Area native Ryan Coogler. It was about the real-life police shooting of Oscar Grant, 22, right here in Oakland, where Grant's killing landed less like a news story and more like the death of a friend or a child. He had worked at a popular grocery, gone to schools and summer camps with the children of acquaintances. His death — he was shot by the transit police while handcuffed, unarmed and face down on a train-station platform, early in the morning of New Year's Day 2009 — sparked intense grief, outrage and sustained protest, years before Black Lives Matter took shape as a movement. Coogler's telling took us slowly through the minutiae of Grant's last day alive: We saw his family and child, his struggles at work, his relationship to a gentrifying city, his attempts to make sense of a young life that felt both aimless and daunting. But the moment I remember most took place after the movie was over: A group of us, friends and strangers alike and nearly all black, stood in the cool night under the marquee, crying and holding one another. It didn't matter that we didn't know one another. We knew enough.

On a misty morning this January, I found myself standing at that same spot, having gotten out of my car to take a picture of the Grand Lake's marquee. The words "Black Panther" were on it, placed dead center. They were not in normal-size letters; the theater was using the biggest ones it had. All the other titles huddled together in another corner of the marquee. A month away from its Feb. 16 opening, "Black Panther" was, already and by a wide margin, the most important thing happening at the Grand Lake.

Marvel Comics's Black Panther was originally conceived in 1966 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, two Jewish New Yorkers, as a bid to offer black readers a character to identify with. The titular hero, whose real name is T'Challa, is heir apparent to the throne of Wakanda, a fictional African nation. The tiny country has, for centuries, been in nearly sole possession of vibranium, an alien element acquired from a fallen meteor. (Vibranium is powerful and nearly indestructible; it's in the special alloy Captain America's shield is made of.) Wakanda's rulers have wisely kept their homeland and its elemental riches hidden from the world, and in its isolation the nation has grown wildly powerful and technologically advanced. Its secret, of course, is inevitably discovered, and as the world's evil powers plot to extract the resources of yet another African nation, T'Challa's father is cruelly assassinated, forcing the end of Wakanda's sequestration. The young king will be forced to don the virtually indestructible vibranium Black Panther suit and face a duplicitous world on behalf of his people.

This is the subject of Ryan Coogler's third feature film — after "Fruitvale Station" and "Creed" (2015) — and when glimpses of the work first appeared last June, the response was frenzied. The trailer *teaser* — not even the full trailer — racked up 89 million views in 24 hours. On Jan. 10, 2018, after tickets were made available for presale, Fandango's

managing editor, Erik Davis, tweeted that the movie's first 24 hours of advance ticket sales exceeded those of any other movie from the Marvel Cinematic Universe.



From left: Lupita Nyong'o, Chadwick Boseman and Letitia Wright in "Black Panther." Marvel Studios

The black internet was, to put it mildly, exploding. Twitter reported that "Black Panther" was one of the most tweeted-about films of 2017, despite not even opening that year. There were plans for viewing parties, a fund-raiser to arrange a private screening for the Boys & Girls Club of Harlem, hashtags like #BlackPantherSoLit and #WelcomeToWakanda. When the date of the premiere was announced, people began posting pictures of what might be called African-Americana, a kitsch version of an older generation's pride touchstones — kente cloth du-rags, candy-colored nine-button suits, King Jaffe Joffer from "Coming to America" with his lion-hide sash — alongside captions like "This is how I'ma show up to the Black Panther premiere." Someone described how they'd feel approaching the box office by simply posting a video of the Compton rapper Buddy Crip-walking in front of a Moroccan hotel.

None of this is because "Black Panther" is the first major black superhero movie. Far from it. In the mid-1990s, the Damon Wayans vehicle "Blankman" and Robert Townsend's "The Meteor Man" played black-superhero premises for campy laughs. Superheroes are powerful and beloved, held in high esteem by society at large; the idea that a normal black person could experience such a thing in America was so far-fetched as to effectively constitute gallows humor. "Blade," released in 1998, featured Wesley Snipes as a Marvel vampire hunter, and "Hancock" (2008) depicted Will Smith as a slacker antihero, but in each case the actor's blackness seemed somewhat incidental.

"Black Panther," by contrast, is steeped very specifically and purposefully in its blackness. "It's the first time in a very long time that we're seeing a film with centered black people, where we have a lot of agency," says Jamie Broadnax, the founder of Black Girl Nerds, a pop-culture site focused on sci-fi and comic-book fandoms. These characters, she notes, "are rulers of a kingdom, inventors and creators of advanced technology. We're not dealing with black pain, and black suffering, and black poverty" — the usual topics of acclaimed movies about the black experience.

In a video posted to Twitter in December, which has since gone viral, three young men are seen fawning over the "Black Panther" poster at a movie theater. One jokingly embraces the poster while another asks, rhetorically: "This is what white people get to feel all the time?" There is laughter before someone says, as though delivering the punch line to the most painful joke ever told: "I would love this country, too."

**Ryan Coogler** saw his first Black Panther comic book as a child, at an Oakland shop called Dr. Comics & Mr. Games, about a mile from the Grand Lake Theater. When I sat down with him in early February, at the Montage Hotel in Beverly Hills, I told him about the night I saw "Fruitvale Station," and he listened with his head down, slowly nodding. When he looked up at me, he seemed to be blinking back tears of his own.



Cover of Fantastic Four comic book from 1966, Black Panther's debut. Marvel

Coogler played football in high school, and between his fitness and his humble listening poses — leaning forward, elbows propped on knees — he reminds me of what might happen if a mild-mannered athlete accidentally discovered a radioactive movie camera and was gifted with remarkable artistic vision. He's interested in questions of identity: What does it mean to be a black person or an African person? "You know, you got to have the race conversation," he told me, describing how his parents prepared him for the world. "And you can't have that without having the slavery conversation. And with the slavery conversation comes a question of, O.K., so what about before that? And then when you ask that question, they got to tell you about a place that nine times out of 10 they've never been before. So you end up hearing about Africa, but it's a skewed version of it. It's not a tactile version."

Around the time he was wrapping up "Creed," Coogler made his first journey to the continent, visiting Kenya, South Africa and the Kingdom of Lesotho, a tiny nation in the center of the South African landmass. Tucked high amid rough mountains, Lesotho was spared much of the colonization of its neighbors, and Coogler based much of his concept of Wakanda on it. While he was there, he told me, he was being shown around by an older woman who said she'd been a

lover of the South African pop star Brenda Fassie. Riding along the hills with this woman, Coogler was told that they would need to visit an even older woman in order to drop off some watermelon. During their journey, they would stop occasionally to approach a shepherd and give him a piece of watermelon; each time the shepherd would gingerly take the piece, wrap it in cloth and tuck it away as though it were a religious totem. Time passed. Another bit of travel, another shepherd, another gift of watermelon. Eventually Coogler grew frustrated: “Why are we stopping so much?” he asked. “Watermelon is sacred,” he was told. “It hydrates, it nourishes and its seeds are used for offerings.” When they arrived at the old woman’s home, it turned out that she was, in fact, a watermelon farmer, but her crop had not yet ripened — she needed a delivery to help her last the next few weeks.

When I was a kid, I refused to eat watermelon in front of white people. To this day, the word itself makes me uncomfortable. Coogler told me that in high school he and his black football teammates used to have the same rule: Never eat watermelon in front of white teammates. Centuries of demonizing and ridiculing blackness have, in effect, forced black people to abandon what was once sacred. When we spoke of Africa and black Americans’ attempts to reconnect with what we’re told is our lost home, I admitted that I sometimes wondered if we could ever fully be part of what was left behind. He dipped his head, fell briefly quiet and then looked back at me with a solemn expression. “I think we can,” he said. “It’s no question. It’s almost as if we’ve been brainwashed into thinking that we can’t have that connection.”

“Black Panther” is a Hollywood movie, and Wakanda is a fictional nation. But coming when they do, from a director like Coogler, they must also function as a place for multiple generations of black Americans to store some of our most deeply held aspirations. We have for centuries sought to either find or create a promised land where we would be untroubled by the criminal horrors of our American existence. From Paul Cuffee’s attempts in 1811 to repatriate blacks to Sierra Leone and Marcus Garvey’s back-to-Africa Black Star shipping line to the Afrocentric movements of the ’60s and ’70s, black people have populated the Africa of our imagination with our most yearning attempts at self-realization. In my earliest memories, the Africa of my family was a warm fever dream, seen on the record covers I stared at alone, the sun setting over glowing, haloed Afros, the smell of incense and oils at the homes of my father’s friends — a beauty so pure as to make the world outside, one of car commercials and blond sitcom families, feel empty and perverse in comparison. As I grew into adolescence, I began to see these romantic visions as just another irrelevant habit of the older folks, like a folk remedy or a warning to wear a jacket on a breezy day. But by then my generation was building its own African dreamscape, populated by KRS-One, Public Enemy and Poor Righteous Teachers; we were indoctrinating ourselves into a prideful militancy about our worth. By the end of the century, “Black Star” was not just the name of Garvey’s shipping line but also one of the greatest hip-hop albums ever made.

Never mind that most of us had never been to Africa. The point was not verisimilitude or a precise accounting of Africa’s reality. It was the envisioning of a free self. Nina Simone once described freedom as the absence of fear, and as with all humans, the attempt of black Americans to picture a homeland, whether real or mythical, was an attempt to picture a place where there was no fear. This is why it doesn’t matter that Wakanda was an idea from a comic book, created by two Jewish artists. No one knows colonization better than the colonized, and black folks wasted no time in recolonizing Wakanda. No genocide or takeover of land was required. Wakanda is ours now. We do with it as we please.

**Until recently, most** popular speculation on what the future would be like had been provided by white writers and futurists, like Isaac Asimov and Gene Roddenberry. Not coincidentally, these futures tended to carry the power dynamics of the present into perpetuity. Think of the original “Star Trek,” with its peaceful, international crew, still under the charge of a white man from Iowa. At the time, the character of Lieutenant Uhura, played by Nichelle Nichols, was so vital for African-Americans — the black woman of the future as an accomplished philologist — that, as Nichols told NPR, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. himself persuaded her not to quit the show after the first season. It was a symbol of great progress that she was conceived as something more than a maid. But so much still stood in the way of her being conceived as a captain.

The artistic movement called Afrofuturism, a decidedly black creation, is meant to go far beyond the limitations of the white imagination. It isn’t just the idea that black people will exist in the future, will use technology and science, will travel deep into space. It is the idea that we will have won the future. There exists, somewhere within us, an image in which we are whole, in which we are home. Afrofuturism is, if nothing else, an attempt to imagine what that home would

be. “Black Panther” cannot help being part of this. “Wakanda itself is a dream state,” says the director Ava DuVernay, “a place that’s been in the hearts and minds and spirits of black people since we were brought here in chains.” She and Coogler have spent the past few months working across the hall from each other in the same editing facility, with him tending to “Black Panther” and her to her much-anticipated film of Madeleine L’Engle’s “A Wrinkle in Time.” At the heart of Wakanda, she suggests, lie some of our most excruciating existential questions: “What if they didn’t come?” she asked me. “And what if they didn’t take us? What would that have been?”



From left: Chadwick Boseman and Daniel Kaluuya in “Black Panther” Marvel Studios

Afrofuturism, from its earliest iterations, has been an attempt to imagine an answer to these questions. The movement spans from free-jazz thinkers like Sun Ra, who wrote of an African past filled with alien technology and extraterrestrial beings, to the art of Krista Franklin and Ytasha Womack, to the writers Octavia Butler, Nnedi Okorafor and Derrick Bell, to the music of Jamila Woods and Janelle Monáe. Their work, says John I. Jennings — a media and cultural studies professor at the University of California, Riverside, and co-author of “Black Comix Returns” — is a way of upending the system, “because it jumps past the victory. Afrofuturism is like, ‘We already won.’ ” Comic books are uniquely suited to handling this proposition. In them the laws of our familiar world are broken: Mild-mannered students become godlike creatures, mutants walk among us and untold power is, in an instant, granted to the most downtrodden. They offer an escape from reality, and who might need to escape reality more than a people kidnapped to a stolen land and treated as less-than-complete humans?

At the same time, it is notable that despite selling more than a million books and being the first science-fiction author to win a MacArthur fellowship, Octavia Butler, one of Afrofuturism’s most important voices, never saw her work transferred to film, even as studios churned out adaptations of lesser works on a monthly basis. Butler’s writing not only featured African-Americans as protagonists; it specifically highlighted African-American women. If projects by and about black men have a hard time getting made, projects by and about black women have a nearly impossible one. In March, Disney will release “A Wrinkle in Time,” featuring Storm Reid and Oprah Winfrey in lead roles; the excitement around this female-led film does not seem to compare, as of yet, with the explosion that came with “Black Panther.” But by focusing on a black female hero — one who indeed saves the universe — DuVernay is embodying the deepest and most powerful essence of Afrofuturism: to imagine ourselves in places where we had not been previously imagined.

Can films like these significantly change things for black people in America? The expectations around “Black Panther” remind me of the way I heard the elders in my family talking about the mini-series “Roots,” which aired on ABC in 1977. A multigenerational drama based on the best-selling book in which Alex Haley traced his own family history, “Roots” told the story of an African slave kidnapped and brought to America, and traced his progeny through over 100 years of American history. It was an attempt to claim for us a home, because to be black in America is to be both with and

without one: You are told that you must honor this land, that to refuse this is tantamount to hatred — but you are also told that you do not belong here, that you are a burden, an animal, a slave. Haley, through research and narrative and a fair bit of invention, was doing precisely what Afrofuturism does: imagining our blackness as a thing with meaning and with lineage, with value and place.

“The climate was very different in 1977,” the actor LeVar Burton recalled to me recently. Burton was just 19 when he landed an audition, his first ever, for the lead role of young Kunta Kinte in the mini-series. “We had been through the civil rights movement, and there were visible changes as a result, like there was no more Jim Crow,” he told me. “We felt that there were advancements that had been made, so the conversation had really sort of fallen off the table.” The series, he said, was poised to reignite that conversation. “The story had never been told before from the point of view of the Africans. America, both black and white, was getting an emotional education about the costs of slavery to our common American psyche.”

To say that “Roots” held the attention of a nation for its eight-consecutive-night run in January 1977 would be an understatement. Its final episode was viewed by 51.1 percent of all American homes with televisions, a kind of reach that seemed sure to bring about some change in opportunities, some new standing in American culture. “The expectation,” Burton says, “was that this was going to lead to all kinds of positive portrayals of black people on the screen both big and small, and it just didn’t happen. It didn’t go down that way, and it’s taken years.”

**Here in Oakland,** I am doing what it seems every other black person in the country is doing: assembling my delegation to Wakanda. We bought tickets for the opening as soon as they were available — the first time in my life I’ve done that. Our contingent is made up of my 12-year-old daughter and her friend; my 14-year-old son and his friend; one of my oldest confidants, dating back to adolescence; and two of my closest current friends. Not everyone knows everyone else. But we all know enough. Our group will be eight black people strong.

Beyond the question of what the movie will bring to African-Americans sits what might be a more important question: What will black people bring to “Black Panther”? 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. We know that there is no end to the reminders that our lives, our hearts, our personhoods are expendable. Yes, many nonblack people will say differently; they will declare their love for us, they will post Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela quotes one or two days a year. But the actions of our country and its collective society, and our experiences within it, speak unquestionably to the opposite. Love for black people isn’t just *saying* Oscar Grant should not be dead. Love for black people is Oscar Grant not being dead in the first place.

This is why we love ourselves in the loud and public way we do — because we have to counter his death with the very same force with which such deaths attack our souls. The writer and academic Eve L. Ewing told me a story about her partner, a professor of economics at the University of Chicago: When it is time for graduation, he makes the walk from his office to the celebration site in his full regalia — the gown with velvet panels, full bell sleeves and golden piping, the velvet tam with gold-strand bullion tassel. And when he does it, every year, like clockwork, some older black woman or man he doesn’t know will pull over, roll down their window, stop him and say, with a slow head shake and a deep, wide smile, something like: “I am just so *proud* of you!”

This is how we do with one another. We hold one another as a family because we must be a family in order to survive. Our individual successes and failures belong, in a perfectly real sense, to all of us. That can be for good or ill. But when it is good, it is very good. It is sunlight and gold on vast African mountains, it is the shining splendor of the Wakandan warriors poised and ready to fight, it is a collective soul as timeless and indestructible as vibranium. And with this love we seek to make the future ours, by making the present ours. We seek to make a place where we belong.

*Sign up for our newsletter to get the best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week.*

A version of this article appears in print on , Page 26 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Making A Motherland

