
Decolonizing the MCU?

Representation of Indigeneity in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*

by JULIET TAVERNIER

This paper aims to analyze the portrayal of Indigenous People in the Marvel film *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*. Analysis of films in popular media is crucial in determining whether these movies benefit Indigenous People or further exacerbate misconceptions of their identity. Techniques of decolonization are discussed including use of indigenous names over those created by colonizers to give power to those who have been oppressed. The film also includes alternative portrayals which challenge well-established stereotypes about the motivation of Indigenous Groups and the roles played by people within the Indigenous Community. Additionally, the harmful effects of colonialism and capitalism are explored as they have eliminated the power of Indigenous People in the past and continue to do so in the present. The portrayal of Indigenous People in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* does not completely summarize or speak to the issues faced by Indigenous Communities but encourages viewers to challenge and explore the ideas they hold around Indigenous Identity and Indigenous peoples.

Keywords: Black Panther, Wakanda Forever, indigenous peoples, capitalocene, colonialism, conservation, indigenous stereotypes

The indigenous population worldwide is estimated to be over 426 million (United Nations). Given the number of Indigenous People, it is essential to consider their representation in popular media which is consumed by many people internationally. The film *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, which debuted in 2022, has garnered over 859.1 million dollars from the box office (D'Alessandro "Most Valuable Blockbuster") and was the most watched Marvel global premiere on Disney Plus with an estimated 2.1 million U.S households who tuned in during the first five days of its release (D'Alessandro "Most Watched Marvel Global Premiere"). With so many viewers of this media, harmful stereotypes can be perpetuated, casting indigenous as simple, which takes away their agency to represent themselves. Western outlets need to give voice to the indigenous and present the opportunity for them to decolonize on the global stage. It is crucial to analyze the portrayal of Indigenous People from Latin America in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* because of the worldwide audience it reaches and to see if the depiction is accurate. Within the film, themes emerge

around the importance of agency in names, preserving land and culture, and refuting colonialism and its harmful stereotypes.

Colonization and Naming as a Tactic of Decolonization

Since the 1500s in Central and South America, there has been a long history of colonization. Spain and other nations have sought to make the indigenous their subjects while acculturating and converting them to Catholicism (Ginzberg 3). There were attacks on the people in all facets of life, from economically to spiritually, and many were enslaved literally or forced to rely on the conquistadors (Ginzberg 133). Burman states that colonialism is a process that affects individuals in the social, political, and economic aspects but also in mind, body, and spirit (73). The process of colonization can be anything from eliminating a native language in favor of a colonizing one or religious conversion.

There are also two distinct types of colonialism, one of which is extractive colonialism, where the members of a region are forced into work so that a nation can benefit from

harvesting resources from afar. In contrast, there is settler colonialism, where colonizers moved to an area and set out to eliminate the presence of the indigenous through acculturation or displacement. Both types are present in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* as the indigenous leader K'uk'ulkan tells Shuri about how his people ended up in the water following centuries of conquest and enslavement by surface nations because of their resources (1:18:45-1:18:55). This type of settler colonialism is what led to the development of Talokan and now they are dealing with extractive colonialism as countries like France and the United States seek to encroach on Wakanda and Talokan for the attainment of vibranium.

Due to colonial influence that continues to this day Indigenous Peoples and other groups that have been colonized must have the opportunity to assert their agency in the international sector. One way this agency can be reinforced is by using names created for and used by the Indigenous Groups. This idea occurs at two different points during the film and is essential in asserting Indigenous Groups' identity and cultural preservation. When we are first introduced to K'uk'ulkan, he says that Namor is the name he is called by his enemies (*Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* 27:43-27:55). Later, we discover that this was given to him by a Spanish priest who called him the son of Satan and called him the child without love (*Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* 1:09:44-1:10:09). K'uk'ulkan keeps this colonizing name as a reminder of his hate for the surface world, but his people use his original name. These two names cast K'uk'ulkan as two different people, with the real him somewhere in between. On the one hand, he is Namor, unafraid to wage war on nations that threaten him and his people. Conversely, K'uk'ulkan seeks to protect himself and his people, wanting to maintain their traditions and power while remaining in the home they have made. Those who do not know K'uk'ulkan and neglect the history of colonization paint him as a villain without love when he holds the greatest love for his nation.

The significance of names has given Indigenous People the agency to represent themselves

as they wish. Emil Keme introduces a new term for Latin America. Abiyala, derived from an Indigenous Group, refers to the diverse Indigenous Groups subjected to colonization (Keme 43). This name was created and advocated for by Indigenous People. Abiyala is an important term as it recognizes the different cultural and linguistic groups in South America but also unites them in their history of oppression and the current battle to be recognized legally and socially. These indigenous terms are how these people define their culture and assert autonomy over colonial and neo-colonial influences in their everyday life. The use and understanding of these terms are crucial not just to the indigenous but the global population in giving power and voice to those who have been targeted in the past. Abiyala and K'uk'ulkan recognize the shadowed history of how the Indigenous People came to be in the present and allows them to share their complex and unique identities.

Environmentalism, Colonialism, and the Capitalocene

Previous paragraphs have spoken to the destructivity of Western powers on the culture and identity of Indigenous People due to their thirst for resources and control. However, the need for profit has also harmed the environment and land many Indigenous Groups call home. As Treadwell (54) describes our current age, we are in a time distinctly marked by the harmful activities of humans driven by capitalism; we are in the Capitalocene. Colonialism and capitalism are not the same but have similarities with a power dynamic in which one party seeks to control another politically, economically, or through other means. Both ideas spread the idea that competition is necessary, that one group must dominate over another by any means necessary. In *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, the Indigenous Groups reject both ideas as they work to protect their land and keep it from being overtaken by other powers.

The indigenous can be seen as environmental conservationists, looking to keep their water pristine and prevent destructive activities like drilling and mining. In the present, one Indigenous Group in Peru claims their right

to the land and opposes both mining practices and the national government's establishment of a Regional Conservation Area (Merino 103). The creation of this area negates the ancestral claims of the indigenous to the land, and thus we can see the conservation area as a point of neocolonialism. The indigenous claim that the government had no legitimate power to ban all activities from being conducted in that region and say it casts them as intruders on their territory. Additionally, the indigenous point out that the land's biodiversity exists because they have protected the forest and are the best conservationists of the land (Merino 104). Thus, we see how the right to protect and claim the land is both an issue of capitalism and colonialism; it is an issue of the Capitalocene. Capitalists need to delegate this land as necessary for oil companies to drill and compete in the global market. However, creating a regional conservation area is a neo-colonial issue as it denies the sovereignty of the indigenous and their claims to the land. In both Peru and the film, we see powers outside of the Indigenous Community try to delegitimize the sovereignty of the indigenous by limiting their claims to land with excuses of conservation or economic gain.

Due to the history of these indigenous lands, we can see how the area or region of one's ancestors can shape one's Indigenous Identity. When groups claim rights to their land, they are not only working as environment conservationists but as cultural conservationists as well. These lands are where their ancestral activities occur; this is their culture's birthplace. Being forced from one's home disrupts the identity of individuals. This idea is represented in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* as K'uk'ulkan calls Wakanda a beautiful, protected land where the people had not had to move or change who they are (27:26-27:34). With the history of how Talokan came to be, we see the connection between land and one's identity. Talokan is marked by its development in the water and the flourishing city built after escaping the Spanish conquistadors. In this, too, we see the importance of language as they escaped a hateful language and how their Indigenous Language is not a disad-

vantage but a strength against colonization.

The protection of vibranium is also the protection of their culture. As the plant that sprouted from vibranium gave them the ability to live in the water, this is essential to their identity as the nation of Talokan. Protection of this plant has created an entire city and weapons that make them comparable to any force on land. The attacks against other nations are not about protecting a profitable source but saving Indigenous Knowledge and the history and traditions that come with the plant. Within *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, we can see the connections between capitalism and colonialism as the attempt to subvert the Indigenous People's autonomy and the indigenous efforts to protect their culture and environment, which are closely intertwined with one another.

Analysis of Indigenous Characteristics in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*

Within the film, the indigenous are portrayed as a complex group of people, challenging the idea that there is only one correct interpretation of the motivation of Indigenous Communities. This representation is essential because many films in the past have created images that are harmful and represent the indigenous in a way that is not accurate or holistic (Pearson and Knabe 3). A typical portrayal of the indigenous is simply as the victims of colonization. Once the Spanish and other powers invaded Abiyala, people were eliminated and defeated, left to bend to the will of their colonizers. However, this does not give power to the Indigenous People and neglects the efforts of the indigenous to defend their homes and culture. Many places across the continent managed to fight off colonization for a long time or altogether.

Conversely, films have cast Indigenous People as violent, using cruel tactics to defeat their enemies and driven by their need for vengeance against the powers that invaded their homes. These narratives are not entirely false, yet they are not entirely true. The history of Indigenous People is much more complex and individual to the group in question.

This analysis will focus on the film's char-

acters and the portrayal of Indigenous Identity. In *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, both Talokan and Wakanda are not shown as nations stuck in the past (Pearson and Knabe 4) only adhering to the customs of their ancestors. Instead, we see Talokan as choosing technology and tradition. We see how the indigenous use technology to benefit them. They are in a new age where they are neither disappearing into the past nor emerging as a group diverging from their indigeneity. This film shows the Indigenous People navigating contemporary issues of neo-colonialism while addressing their past.

We see a fantastical element to K'uk'ulkan and Talokan, which takes a Post-Indian stance. Postindian is an idea introduced by Gerald Vizenor and is a parody of the Indian as it refutes colonial ideology in an innovative manner (Carlson 22). The portrayal of K'uk'ulkan is ironic as we see his supernatural abilities and his dominating power over any colonizer. However, this literary figure sets out to show the perspective of those motivated by their oppression and asserts their sovereignty to control themselves and the way they are portrayed. This challenges the idea of indigenous as victims in a new format and reverses how the audience thinks about the fight between these non-colonial nations and the Western powers seeking to control their resources.

We also see women as leaders and the driving forces of change in the film. Both Queen Ramanda and Shuri are potent women, shown to be capable of saving their people and their home. In discussions over the effect of colonialism on the role of women, there has been debate on whether women are cast under men due to colonial ideology or whether it is the product of the patriarchal aspect of certain Indigenous Cultures (Burman 67). Nonetheless, the presentation of two female leaders of the nation of Wakanda, disputes the idea that Indigenous Women will always play a subordinate role. K'uk'ulkan is defeated by Shuri, which is significant because she stands for a new indigenous stance that promotes technology, tradition, and coexistence. The moment when Shuri shows

mercy to K'uk'ulkan is monumental. The violence Talokan's leader sought to wage makes him no better than the colonial powers, seeking to destroy another nation for his gain. However, in the end, Shuri advocates for decolonizing the struggle and creating a new legacy where the nations can both exist, respect, and recognize their individual cultures.

Conclusion

With a company as profitable and popular as Marvel, it is important to look at the portrayals they bring to life. In California, the National Hispanic Media Coalition arranged the film showing at a local indigenous school because members had wished for representation as a child. They believed in the benefits of the children seeing someone they can relate to on the screen (Walker). One reviewer, who is of Nawa descent, says the movie is a chance for children to see that they are not ignorant, stupid, or anything else that society places on Indigenous People (Blanck).

The film brings a new dimension to the Indigenous People in Latin America as the struggle for autonomy is depicted in the renewal of indigenous names, the conservation of land and culture, and the recognition of land rights. Moreover, we see the rejection of stereotypes as new ideas around the power and ideology of the indigenous are brought to life on the global stage.

Black Panther: Wakanda Forever is not perfect in its portrayal of Indigenous People, but it is a step in the right direction as it creates a different representation that breaks from the past and places agency in the hands of those who have longed to make their voices heard.

Bibliography

Burman, Anders. "Colonialism and Decolonization." *Indigeneity and Decolonization in the Bolivian Andes: Ritual Practice and Activism*. Washington DC, Lexington Books, 2017, pp. 51-76.

Black Panther: Wakanda Forever. Directed by Ryan Coogler, performances by Letitia Wright, Tenoch Huerta, and Lupita Nyong'o, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2022.

- Blanck, Nili. "The Mesoamerican Influences Behind Namor From 'Black Panther: Wakanda Forever'." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 10th Nov. 2022, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-mesoamerican-influences-behind-namor-from-black-panther-wakanda-forever-180981106/>
- D'Alessandro, Anthony. "'Black Panther: Wakanda Forever' Claws Way to No. 5 in Deadline's 2022 Most Valuable Blockbuster Tournament." *Deadline*, 7 Apr. 2023, deadline.com/2023/04/black-panther-wakanda-forever-box-office-profits-1235320190/.
- D'Alessandro, Anthony. "'Black Panther: Wakanda Forever' Most Watched Marvel Global Premiere on Disney+; Samba TV Measures 2.1m U.S. Households." *Deadline*, 6 Feb. 2023, deadline.com/2023/02/black-panther-wakanda-forever-disney-premiere-streaming-record-1235251392/.
- David J. Carlson. "Trickster Hermeneutics and the Postindian Reader: Gerald Vizenor's Constitutional Praxis." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2011, pp. 13–47. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5250/studamerindilite.23.4.0013>.
- Emil Keme, and Adam Coon. "For Abiyala to Live, the Americas Must Die: Toward a Transhemispheric Indigeneity." *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2018, pp. 42–68. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5749/natiindistudj.5.1.0042>.
- Ginzberg, Eitan. "Introduction. "Genocide and Destruction of the Indigenous Peoples of Hispano America: A Genocidal Encounter. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2018, pp. 1-31
- "Indigenous Peoples." United Nations, www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/indigenous-peoples. Accessed 11 May 2023.
- Merino, Roger. "Conflicting Sovereignties: Global Conservation, Protected Areas, and Indigenous Nations in the Peruvian Amazon." *Global Environmental Politics*, vol. 22 no. 2, 2022, pp. 95-116. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/853330.
- Santoro, Miléna, and Erick D. Langer. "The Early Colonial Origins of Indigeneity in and around the Basin of Mexico." *Hemispheric Indigeneities: Native Identity and Agency in Mesoamerica, the Andes, and Canada*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2018, pp. 3-44.
- Treadwell H. M. "Extinction in Embrace of the Serpent". *Transmotion*, Vol. 7, no. 2, 2021, pp. 54-76, doi:10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.973.
- Walker, DeArbea. "Members of the Latinx community say they hope the representation of Namor in 'Black Panther: Wakanda Forever,' catapults more Latinx superheroes on the big screen." *INSIDER*, 11th Nov. 2022, <https://www.insider.com/black-panther-wakanda-forever-means-latinx-community-namor-representation-2022-11>
- Pearson, Wendy Gay, and Susan Knabe. "Globalizing Indigenous Film and Media." *Reverse Shots: Indigenous Film and Media in an International Context*. Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014, pp. 3-40.