



Written by [Eric Egan](#) on February 26, 2018

## Black Panther Pounces on Social Justice Warriors

Even before it was released *Black Panther* took the collective intellectual elite imagination by storm. The intellectual Left hailed it as the great hope of African American cinematic liberation. The intellectual Right rolled its eyes, perhaps expecting a racist screed against the more melanin challenged among us. They had reason to be worried based on how the Left chose to frame the pre-release discussion. How many of these people actually read the comic book, I have no idea.



I have not, and the film was hardly on my radar until Ben Shapiro did a piece on Emily Lakdawalla, the senior editor of some planetary science rag. She tweeted one of those questions you assume must be a parody for its sheer idiocy — until you realize, “Oh. She was serious.” She asked if, you know, being white and all, would it suck “black joy” out of the theater to see the movie before the second weekend. Just to be clear, I most certainly did not suck anyone’s “black joy” out of the theater, having seen the film a week after its release. I would also like to take a bite of a candy bar called “Black Joy” one day. It sounds delightful. But I digress. The only question that really matters — is *Black Panther* worth your hard earned scratch?

To that question, I’d have to give a resounding yes.

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*Black Panther* is a solid, above-average superhero flick. Whew. I’m so glad I’m not racist. If you like superhero flicks, especially of the Marvel variety, you should do yourself a favor and check it out. It’s bright, it’s flashy, and it adds enough trappings of newness to stand on its own two feet among the seemingly never-ending Pantheon of superhero movies.

The titular hero’s suit has the capability to store the kinetic energy of any force applied to it (kicks, bullets, falls, etc.) and then release that energy on command, acting like a kinetic wave bomb. It’s a cool gimmick. But *Black Panther* also manages to be a bit more than just your average superhero bag of tricks. It manages to explore some deeper themes of national allegiance, ancestry, tradition, race, and culture.

It suffers a bit from cinematographic ADD in the beginning with a flurry of character introductions that is handled a tad clumsily. But this is in no way enough to derail the film’s merits as an entertaining and thoughtful piece of cinema, and the film stays remarkably focused for a modern superhero flick. The acting is pretty top notch with the highlights coming from Winston Duke as M’Baku (an exhilarating embodiment of jovial barbarism), Andy Serkis as Klaue (he ain’t white, he’s chameleon), and Letitia Wright as Shuri (she’s got cute, kid-sister down). Aside from some minimal stodgy, “superhero-y” writing forced upon the cast, all the performances are top notch.

The story centers around Prince T’Challa aka the Black Panther, played by Chadwick Boseman. He rules over the fictional nation of Wakanda, a central African country that the rest of the world believes is a



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third world country who's primary contribution to world affairs is sheep. All is not as it appears to be, however. Through access to a rare and powerful mineral called Vibranium and through a rare plant given to the first king of the Wakandans by a goddess, the Wakandans are able to hide their hyper-advanced civilization from the outside world and keep it protected. It is a trope familiar to those who have seen *Wonder Woman*.

It is against this backdrop — a walled off, homogeneous, isolationist nation — that the film explores its themes.

There is a single line around which the thematic elements of the film hinge. A Wakandan who had been raised in America chooses death over what he views as bondage. He wishes to die "like his ancestors who chose to jump to their deaths off slave ships." However, the fictional Wakandans were never part of the slave trade. This man's ancestors weren't slaves from other African nations but Wakandans. Yet he chooses to identify with black people all around the world based solely on skin color and assumes a *shared* history that is non-existent. The Wakandans, however, view the world through the lens of *Wakandan* culture — not race and not Africa. They are a culturalist people.

The film espouses the idea that a shared color of skin means nothing more than a different color of skin. The film is entirely anti-racist, whether from a black supremacist, white supremacist, or blue supremacist view — it is the Marvel Universe. I'm sure there are blue supremacists somewhere in it.

As it turns out both the Left and the Right were both a bit right and a bit wrong about *Black Panther*. The Left was correct to hail the film as important for the African American community. Many in the African American community feel empowered by seeing an almost entirely black cast duke it out on screen in a superhero movie. The Left was wrong to push *Black Panther* as some sort of savior of black cinema, however. Doing so minimized many that came before *Black Panther*, including Blade, Storm, Hancock, and other black superhero characters. They were also very wrong in assuming that it would validate any idea of radical equality.

The Right was correct to roll their eyes at the Left's framing of the discussion. They were wrong to assume that the film would be an unthoughtful Social Justice Warrior (SJW) vehicle because it is anything but. As with any film, no viewer is likely to agree with everything but there is much to like here for any reasonable person.

Superhero stories tend to eschew any attempts to interpret them through a lens of radical equality. How much more unequal can you get than a superhero — someone who has near total individual agency over his actions via super powers. The SJW crowd should not have been surprised that *Black Panther* would not fit neatly into their equality narratives. And judging by the box office (\$320M one week in) they certainly won't be happy that the film they hoped would reinforce their ideals is reinforcing other ideals entirely. To that, we can all say, "Wakanda forever!"

*Photo: Disney*



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