

# Wakanda Forever

RAVYNN K. STRINGFIELD

Chadwick Boseman's career defied the limits of temporality. He portrayed some of Black history's most influential icons, including Jackie Robinson, James Brown, and Thurgood Marshall. His personal presence, as many have noted, was rife with kindness and compassion. For many, one of his greatest contributions was to help many reimagine the potential of Black futures by taking up the mantle of Black Panther. For me, my love of Black Panther, and the questions I asked while engaging with the media featuring him, were critical to my coming of age as a scholar and fundamental to my formative years in the Academy.

I pivoted into studying American comic books after spending the last couple years of my undergraduate education studying *bande dessinée* (Franco-Belgian comic books) featuring people of color from outside *L'Hexagone* (i.e. France), which was the focus of my thesis. The questions I had about representation in French comics could be applied to American ones, and the first character I began to engage with in this new critical way was Black Panther.

My work with Black Panther began the summer before I started grad school with a blog called *King of the Black Millennials* that I co-authored with my close friend and filmmaker Micah Ariel Watson. I brought my deep love of comics, and Micah brought her training in film to the conversation. While it was for public consumption, we were teaching each other about the various ways we could study Black history and media. Approaching her Junior year in college, Micah wrote, "I think it's important that the Millennials' imaginary king first played real Black royalty. [...] Superheroes like Black Panther cannot exist in isolation. They become powerful on the shoulders of the Kwame Nkrumah's and Simone Manuel's and Nat Turner's of the world that remind us how beautifully powerful we are."<sup>1</sup> Even in 2016, we were attempting to think through what it meant symbolically for

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<sup>1</sup> Micah Ariel Watson. "A Brotha Named Chadwick." *King of the Black Millennials*, 21 Aug. 2016, <https://kingoftheblackmillennials.wordpress.com/2016/08/21/a-brotha-named-chadwick>.

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Chadwick, with all that he brought as an actor and his body of work, to play a hero that pushed the limits of our collective imagination.



Image: *Wakanda Forever* by Abigail Cano

The work that Micah and I began became the foundation for my scholarship as a first semester graduate student: the synchronicity of the Stokeley Carmichael's first Black Power speech, the founding of the Black Panther Party and Black Panther's first appearance in a *Fantastic Four* comic, all occurring in 1966 plagued me. Over the course of at least three seminar papers, a scalar project, my first conference presentation and my master's thesis, I explored that synchronicity, the history of the first Black illustrator on *Jungle Action featuring Black Panther*, Billy Graham, and the evolution of the Dora Milaje, ending with Roxane Gay's work on *World of Wakanda*.

In the midst of all of this work, the *Black Panther* film was released. I approached it hesitantly, skeptically, because after all of that, I did not know if I could handle disappointment. But with Boseman as the leading man, a legendary

supporting cast, Ryan Coogler at the directorial helm and Ruth E. Carter on costumes, I should have had more faith.

I saw *Black Panther* for the first time at an early showing the day before it was officially released at the movie theater just a quick walk up the street from my apartment. I had planned my outfit for months before; I carefully twisted out my hair and adorned the most Wakandan jewelry I had. I went by myself for two reasons: because if I did not like it, I wanted to avoid the awkward post-movie conversation that follows every group viewing of a film, and because if I did, I knew I would cry.

And I sobbed in that theater packed with Black folks, collectively gasping with joy and cackling at the expertly delivered one-liners. I cried because all of these people were seeing, on a big screen with surround sound, what was possible. We were collectively seeing a vision of a Black future. We were collectively experiencing a joy that was beyond explanation or analysis. We had a metaphorical Black diasporic King that many of us could, and did, rally behind.

Of course, the critiques would come; it is a flawed assumption that art created by Black people cannot be critiqued by other Black people. Such a stance relies on the idea that representation should be and is enough. I would argue that, yes, representation is important, and we should continually work towards crafting and creating art that constantly defies, ruptures, and builds anew.

Chadwick Boseman was unquestionably part of this process of using art to investigate how we view history and how we imagined futures. He worked to give us a place to start and build upon, one that he developed with quiet dedication and resolve. That was his legacy, and it is a good one.

We never imagined that a rallying cry would become a farewell so soon: *Wakanda Forever*.