https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/02/16/black-panther-why-the-relationship-between-africans-and-african-americans-is-so-messed-up/

**Opinion: ‘Black Panther’: Why the relationship between Africans and black Americans is so messed up**

**WARNING: This post contains spoilers and discusses characters in Marvel’s “Black Panther.” I will feed you a nice Ghanaian jollof meal if you read further anyway.**

*Finally! “Black Panther” weekend has hit the United States. Marvel’s newest superhero film was one of the most anticipated movies in 2018, and already it is poised to* [*shatter box-office records*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2018/02/16/here-are-the-box-office-records-black-panther-could-break-this-weekend/?utm_term=.c25240658fc9&itid=lk_inline_manual_3) *(the film is expected to rake in about $250 million this weekend) and Hollywood stereotypes about black movies not being marketable. Black audiences in the United States are planning special outfits and parties and raising funds to take children to see the film. But how do Africans feel about this fictional tale of Wakanda, especially when black people in the United States and Africa don’t always seem to understand one another? I decided to talk to Kenyan journalist and broadcaster Larry Madowo to get his thoughts on the film, Wakanda and… those accents. Enjoy! — Karen*

**Karen Attiah:** Okay, so I know we are basically going to be talking about Wakanda, this fictional African country in “Black Panther.” I finally saw it on Tuesday, and I still feel like African Americans and Africans have still been speaking in silos about the movie, and not to one another.

So as a Kenyan, what did you think about the movie? How did you feel about Wakanda?

**Larry Madowo:** So Wakanda looks like a place I want to be a citizen of, because it looks like such a beautiful, egalitarian society, where the women wear their hair natural and they are powerful warriors. It is beautiful in that sense, as a utopia of sorts. Considering the mess so many African countries are in, it’s an escape to see what we can be: the richest country in the world, everything, vibranium in excess. And if you just think, if you build a model for the perfect African country, Wakanda is that.

**Karen:**With everything that Kenya is [going through right now politically](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/world/africa/kenya-protests-american-flag.html), with the messiness over elections, what did you take away from Wakanda?

**Larry:** It did make me think about Kenya because many of the problems that we have in Kenya — and in *most* African countries — are a byproduct of colonialism. … Wakanda was not colonized, so they had a chance to build a society that was free of European influence, whether British or French. We call ourselves Francophone Africa versus Anglophone Africa. We categorize ourselves based on who our oppressor was. I always find that a strange thing. Our identity is so deeply tied to our oppression.

**Karen**: What were the parts of the film that did bother you as a Kenyan? What did you think of the accents?

**Larry:** The accents are all over the place! It was jarring and annoying to me! They wanted to base the accents on Xhosa from South Africa, but some of it sounded Nigerian, others sounded more Ugandan. It was very confusing, and I understand perfecting an accent is difficult, but oh, my goodness, it was so messy! I really liked the costumes. They were great. But ultimately, Wakanda, at least in the film, is an approximation of African culture, an outsider’s version of what African culture might be like — the rituals, song and dance, the rites of passage.

**Karen:** Or even the ancestors thing.

**Larry:** As an African, I didn’t feel accurately represented in “Black Panther.” There was only one African artist whose song played in the background — her name is Babes Wodumo, she’s South African. I have nothing against Kendrick Lamar, but it would be good to [be more representative of African music.](https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/a34794/black-panther-soundtrack-review-kendrick-lamar-tde) It was a missed opportunity to shine a spotlight on African musicians on a huge platform. It would have enriched the story.

**Karen**: For me, it was visually exciting. It was like, “Try to find your culture somewhere!” It was like I was in African history class. I could hear the Nigerian accent. As a Ghanaian, I was like, “There’s kente cloth,” or, “Look, Shuri is wearing aggrey beads!”

**Larry**: It was like African bingo of sorts!

**Karen:** I was excited because I’m not used to seeing African elements on the big screen. Even African Americans here do not know that history or those cultural elements. I can see both sides, as someone who has to explain to white people and African Americans about the beauty of African culture and history. So in a way, “Black Panther” is a one-stop shop, get it all in an hour!

**Larry:** You know the worst thing? There hasn’t been an African premiere for “Black Panther.”

**Karen:** Wait, but wasn’t there a [screening in Kenya](http://metro.co.uk/2018/02/14/lupita-nyongo-honoured-absence-marvels-black-panther-makes-african-premiere-kenya-7313132/), in Lupita Nyong’o’s home town?

**Larry:** That was arranged by a local movie distribution company and Lupita’s dad, who is the [governor of Kisumu](https://www.nation.co.ke/counties/kisumu/Governor-Anyang-Nyongo-homecoming-turns-chaotic/1954182-4307914-bh3xkb/index.html). But there has been no African premiere where the cast and crew came to an African city like Nairobi or Kampala, Johannesburg or Lagos — like they have done for South Korea, like they did in London or like in L.A. So this film that celebrates blackness has not had an African premiere!

**Karen:** But maybe that could be in the works? Lagos, Johannesburg and Accra? These cities represent the growth that Africa is experiencing, the modernity of Africa, which is represented in “Black Panther.”

**Larry:** I could see why they might not have an African premiere. There are less movie theaters in all of Africa than in just in the U.S., so you might not make that much in the grand scheme of things. But it would have been a huge symbolic thing for a movie that unashamedly elevates blackness. I have friends who are going in full Masai wear to the theaters! They feel represented, and yet, the promotion efforts kind of snubbed them.

**Karen**: So on tribalism and politics: When Killmonger ascends the throne and you realize that this man is an existential threat to Wakanda, you realize the other tribes don’t see things the same way. For me, when I went to Ghana for the [elections in 2008](http://ghanaelections.peacefmonline.com/pages/2008/), I was struck by how much tribalism played into politics, that the Ashantis were tied to one party, other tribes to other parties, etc.

**Larry:** Even today, African political parties have tribal vehicles. They will have a tribal chief who will have the power to determine elections. It is very rare across the continent to find a party that is national in nature. A lot of the conflicts across Africa are tribal. [Look at Somalia](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14094503), which has not had a functional government — so much about the clans. Killmonger, King T’Challa and the Jabari Tribe and how they all want different things — that is what goes on in Africa.

**Karen:** What did you make of the white characters in the film, the Americans?

**Larry:** When I was in the theater in Nairobi, and the scene where Jabari did not allow [CIA operative Everett Ross] to speak, the audience clapped! Africans and other black people are tired of seeing white men in white-savior roles. This time, a white man was the sidekick. He was getting his instructions from a black woman, Shuri (Letitia Wright). The representation was satisfying. Let us see some black saviors for a change!

**Karen:**The role of America is interesting in “Black Panther.” Killmonger, who was trained in U.S. military tactics knows how to destabilize countries going through tricky political transitions or right after coups. In history, you think of [Patrice Lumumba’s assassination](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/jan/17/patrice-lumumba-50th-anniversary-assassination), and Kwame Nkrumah’s [fall in Ghana](http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.2307/2128341), which the CIA had a hand in. It’s interesting that in the movie, it was Ross, the CIA agent — converted — who came to see the light about Wakanda and becomes an ally in their fight.

**Larry**: It was appropriate. Yes, for all the Americans who are upset about Russia interfering in elections, I’m like, “Really, America? You’ve been meddling in African elections since the beginning of time! And you don’t hear us complaining. It’s payback time!” The American in the movie knew how to destabilize and just meddle, because that is what America does best.

**Karen**: A big part of this film is the relationship between Africans and African Americans, and it’s probably the most complicated relationship in the film.

**Larry**: It was very indicative of the current relationship between Africans and African Americans. There’s so much animus or competition that I have never quite understood. Both groups use derogatory names to refer to each other. In Africa, African American culture is very big and influential in terms of how people speak and dress. But in creating “Black Panther,” Africans and African Americans came together to create art that black people around the world are proud of. But in everyday life, there is no such unity. I think it’s a vision for what can be possible when the two groups work together.

**Karen:** In some twisted ways, I identified with Killmonger. Growing up, part of my exploration into where my parents came from, I felt a sort of anger towards Africa. Like, how did colonization happen to you? And the poverty? How are these leaders not doing more? And being black in America, when we are going through fights with racism, police brutality, we wonder if Africans even care. And I think, “Well, African nations can’t help us. They can’t impose sanctions on America for its treatment of black people.” Which is why Wakanda is so amazing: It has the power to help other countries.

**Larry**: When it comes to African solutions … African countries gave aid to Haiti during the hurricane, Rwanda is [taking in unwanted African migrants](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/rwanda-10000-refugees-israel-minister-171123203151743.html)from Israel. But yes, there is so much more we can do.

A lot of people here supported Black Lives Matter and don’t think police should be shooting black people in the U.S., but they are perfectly okay with the Kenyan or Zimbabwean police cracking down on protesters violently. You speak out against an injustice half a world away, but when there’s injustice right on your doorstep, you’re okay with it because of the party or politician you endorse.

**Karen:** At the end, when Killmonger is dying, he says wants to be buried in the water with his ancestors, who would rather jump off slave ships than be in bondage. It seems then he personally identifies with slaves as his ancestors and not the ancestors of Wakanda. That’s how deep the divisions are [between Africans and African Americans].

**Larry:** It reminded me of Kunta Kinte from “Roots,” who was a warrior that was taken away. There are people who say of slavery, “I would have not allowed myself to be taken.” I see what he was trying to do there — my ancestors were brave. It is a sort of misplaced bravado.

**Karen:** And gender in the film? How women are depicted?

**Larry:** Africa is a deeply patriarchal society. In this film, women are equal to the men. They protect the king! They have a mind of their own. Nakia (Lupita Nyong’o) doesn’t want to just get married and be a trophy wife.  All the women wear natural hair. In the continent, where weaves and wigs are big business, it’s a legacy of colonialism that kinky hair is not seen as professional.It’s not what you get married in or wear to the office.

**Karen**: Ah, so you are #TeamNatural! And the power of the women doesn’t diminish King T’Challa (Chadwick Boseman). Africa has had societies in which women played more equal roles before the British came with their Victorian ideas about gender divisions. It made me think that Wakanda’s strength is how it capitalizes on the strengths of both men and women. In this #MeToo moment, part of the tragedy of sexism is that it denies women opportunities to be participants in society. Conversely to how women are treated in Wakanda, Killmonger, he’s this hypermasculine, destructive force. He kills his girlfriend who helps him on his mission.

**Larry:** I think he’s the personification of toxic masculinity that is so prevalent in black culture.

**Karen:** I think there’s a very American flavor to his type of anger, but I think of this especially in the wake of the [Florida shooting](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2018/02/16/as-florida-town-mourns-authorities-revisit-possible-warning-signs-before-school-massacre/?itid=lk_inline_manual_56) yesterday, in which a teenager walked into a school and killed 17 people. He abused his ex-girlfriend and stalked another girl, before unleashing his anger and violence on others. But yes, I know sometimes that even Africans have an stereotype that black Americans are gangsters and violent.

**Larry:** Maybe that’s the one overriding stereotype about African Americans here that’s reinforced by hip-hop and quite a few movies. When Africans say, “I’m gangsta,” they’re always referring to the African American caricature.

**Karen**: Well, thanks so much. Here in the U.S., we’ve gone through a year of Donald Trump. We’ve seen overt anti-black racism. We’ve seen KKK marching in the streets, the attempts to keep out and/or deport black and brown immigrants. The filmmakers could not have predicted that this would be the political moment we would be in; it has come at a moment where we’ve needed something empowering.

**Larry**: After the kind of year you all have had in America, no one should take this moment away from you. No one should try to diminish it. From those of us from the outside looking in, finally we have a beautiful celebration of blackness. You all absolutely deserve it!

**Read more:**

[Forget Killmonger: Wakanda’s women are ‘Black Panther’s true black liberators](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/03/01/forget-the-abusive-killmonger-wakandas-women-are-black-panthers-true-black-liberators/?utm_term=.3e463759b436&itid=lk_inline_manual_61)

[‘Black Panther offers a regressive, neocolonial vision of Africa](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/02/26/black-panther-offers-a-regressive-neocolonial-vision-of-africa/?utm_term=.6912ddbf6f65&itid=lk_inline_manual_62)

[‘Black Panther’ feels radical — but also mute when it comes to portraying America](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2018/02/22/black-panther-feels-radical-but-superheroes-can-never-lead-a-real-revolution/?utm_term=.0b661d3613e5&itid=lk_inline_manual_63)

[‘Black Panther’ is a black triumph. America is afraid of those.](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/black-panther-is-a-triumph-in-a-year-of-triumphs-for-people-of-color/2018/02/16/080aaf24-1359-11e8-9065-e55346f6de81_story.html?utm_term=.fa12c48214e3&itid=lk_inline_manual_64)

[‘Black Panther’ is a revelation but also a reminder of what we’ve been missing](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/black-panther-is-a-revelation-but-also-a-reminder-of-what-weve-been-missing/2018/02/15/49b208da-1018-11e8-9065-e55346f6de81_story.html?utm_term=.1d6b02f399c2&itid=lk_inline_manual_65)