



## Wakanda! Take the Wheel! Visions of a Black Green City

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If the trends hold true, Marvel's Black Panther movie could be the highest form of escapism, not only for Black folks within the U.S. but across the African diaspora. Fans are preparing outfits that cosplay just ain't ready for and haven't seen before. Not since Alex Haley's televised miniseries *Roots* (1977) have African Americans scheduled gatherings around a screen en masse for a collective viewing experience. In this case, instead of imagining a possible past bound up in slave narratives delivered on the small screen, the Black Panther movie provides images of a possible future of Black self-determination on the big screen. Marvel's fictional African country, Wakanda, is a tectonic change and paradigm-shifting in the ways Black countries, cities, neighborhoods, and spaces are depicted and understood. This is particularly true for African countries, whose only redeeming qualities within the American gaze tend to be natural landscapes, particularly wildlife reserves and national parks like the Serengeti, full of charismatic yet endangered fauna.

While Wakanda is a mythologization of an African country, it boasts a historical past and present outside the very real complications of colonization, which has a violent history of pilfering natural resources and depleting the wealth of Black nations, leaving behind resource scarcity and unstable economies (Rodney, 2012). Wakanda is governed by a benevolent kingdom and has a powerful but hidden presence on the world stage. The narrative of its natural wealth is expressed through the fictitious extremely rare ore, vibranium, with its large deposit only found on Wakandan lands (Coates, 2016). Wakanda is depicted as a sovereign African nation that produces and has access to the most advanced technologies on the globe (Coates, 2016). Its autonomy as an African nation is directly connected to their control over vibranium, scientific knowledge of its energy manipulating properties, and the concealment of these facts from the rest of the world (Coates, 2016). It is because of this and its governance by a benevolent kingdom, Wakanda has a forceful presence on the world stage. Wakanda, as a utopic Black imaginary, brings together a great African past and a bright Black future as it ruptures the toxic narratives relegated to the global south, Black and Brown nations, and non-white governed spaces.

### We Should Pause to Acknowledge that this Film Comes at a Poignant Time ...

In the midst of cinematic excitement about Marvel's Black Panther and a month before its release, the current president was said to have articulated a disparaging and overtly racist slur leveraged at Black and Brown expatriates and those actively immigrating to the U.S. by questioning: "why do we want all these people from 'shithole countries' coming here?" (Watkins & Phillip, 2018) This is just one example of how the change in administration has ushered in an upsurge of old-school overt racism and conjured up white supremacist images and narratives many hoped were relegated to the past. It is also a display of how predominantly non-white countries, landscapes, and people are thought about and understood as blighted, corrupt, and lacking. Today African Americans are finding racial erasures and threats in whole new ways with some harkening back to the *good old days*.

Current gentrification policies and practices are impacting African Americans and displacing them from what were once called *chocolate cities*, predominantly Black cities governed by predominantly Black leaders. This has led to the rupture of social, cultural, and economic safety nets as long-term residents are pushed outside of their neighborhood, city, and sometimes even their state. While the

promise of the green city was to provide healthy urban ecology to mitigate environmentally compromised areas that impacted low-income residents and people of color, the reality of the green city is creating and reproducing new forms of gentrification.

### (Re)Imagining Racialized Urban Environmentally Just Futures ...

The move from imagined spaces to real material changes is particularly important for Black neighborhoods facing *green gentrification*, which occurs when green space creation, restoration, and beautification projects attract wealthy white populations, which in turn leads to a rise in housing costs and causes the displacement of long-term low-income residents and people of color (Gould & Lewis, 2017). Municipal governments and developers are creating plans for these green projects with renderings minus a Black population, visually announcing these green cities and their neighborhoods as *whites only*.

The concept of the green city has a lineage that dates back to the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, in which the White City was introduced and gave rise to the City Beautiful movement. The White City, named for its white buildings, was accompanied by expansive heavily manicured green spaces, reflecting the prestigious European parks and open spaces grounded within a French aesthetic. Frederick Law Olmsted, as one of the architects of the White City, was also influential in the mass proliferation of parks including the iconic Central Park and Yosemite National Park, which are based in a British aesthetic at the turn of the twentieth century. The white buildings and the green spaces of the White City are still integral to city planning renderings and are recognizable in the visual articulations of green city planning projects which also feature an overwhelmingly white population in spite of the current demographics of neighborhood.

The green city has also been understood to be the next iteration of the Garden City movement, which interestingly enough has its origins in science-fiction. Ebenezer Howard is credited as the father of the Garden City movement and was heavily influenced by the science fiction/fantasy utopian dystopian genre, which was popular during his time. It was specifically the novel of Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000–1887* that acutely influenced him (Schuyler, 2002). Howard's book *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898) is said to have "done more than any other single book to guide the modern town planning movement and to alter its objectives" (Mumford, 1965, p. 29). The garden city movement was the planning impetus behind the creation of the suburbs in an effort to marry the built environment and natural environment; town and country. This is to acknowledge that city planning employed science fiction/speculative fiction to create real material change. My desire, therefore, to use Marvel's Black Panther - a science fiction/speculative fiction film - to tap into new aesthetics and rethink urban design is not unfounded. It is, however, complicated by the work of unthinking Eurocentrism, which "sanitizes Western history while patronizing and even demonizing the non-West" (Shohat & Stam, 2014, p. 3). It is a large ask and an even bigger task to move from fiction to fact, by planning with a healthy grounding in environmental and social justice, as well as understandings of global cultural land-use and housing knowledges, which function outside of Eurocentric ideologies.

Birnin Zana, Wakanda's capital city, also known as the Golden City, gives us a glimpse of a non-white, urban, environmentally just future grounded in an African aesthetic. In so doing it also grants us a vision of a Black green city in the now and present. Marvel's Black Panther (2018) trailer gives us just a peek; an air-craft flies through a layered force field, revealing the metropolis below as Okoye announces, "We are home." The flyover reveals a Stefano Boeri Architetti's Bosco Verticale, (vertical forest) skyscraper, trees, green roofs, colorful buildings, and a train, most likely public transportation, for this bustling urban space. This may be the only representation of a utopian Black city and it is far removed from the dominant depictions of Black spaces as ghettos, slums, or apocalyptic landscapes commonly

displayed on U.S. big screens. The presence of current Italian architecture, the vertical forest, speaks to the difference between adoption of cultural productions through choice and of foreign cultural implementations through force. The Golden City demonstrates that these are urban creations of a different ideology for a different land and for a different culture. The concept art depicts a new Black green urban aesthetic grounded in understandings of African cultural productions; shapes, colors, designs, and functions. We can't ignore this moment for new possibilities.

As we revel in this cinematic event that is *Black Panther*, I ask that we don't come back empty handed after the credits roll. The film represents a type of speculative black fiction or Afrofuturism - or my preference, *Afrocentric speculative fiction* (there's an ongoing debate on these terms) - and I think it's worth paying special attention to this depiction of a futuristic and green chocolate city. Going even further, I also ask us to unthink the Eurocentrism which has become naturalized in the production of space and within the city planning field (Shohat & Stam, 2014). By recognizing and acknowledging that most of our urban spaces are western cultural productions, we can move to create a different, more holistic and inclusive urban landscape that privileges diverse understandings of land use and infrastructure, as well as aesthetics rooted in non-western ideologies.

Moreover, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) can't just be a tagline or named within a mission statement. DEI must be a holistic praxis girded by environmentally and socially just theory and implemented as the guiding framework. This means we must move to include different ways to design our cities using global knowledges. We stand at a pivotal time of intensifying urbanization and climate change, yet we are building our cities within twentieth century sensibilities for twenty-first century realities. The City Beautiful Movement, Howard's Garden Cities, and Frederick Law Olmsted and Company's proliferations of urban and park spaces, are all based in Eurocentrism, which has colonized our landscapes unquestioned for far too long. Can Wakanda take the wheel? The answer ... Yes! It can both steer and stir us into thinking differently about cities, urban green spaces, neighborhoods, and our future.

## Notes on Contributor

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