Wakanda Forever … Please?
Unpacking the Intersectional Feminism of *Black Panther*
By Chelsea Davis

I am a woman OBSESSED. I recently saw the hit Marvel Studios film *Black Panther*, and let me tell you…It was a tour de force of incredible talent all-around. The time, effort, and imagination that went into bringing this comic book character and his world to life was inspiring. The intense research and creativity that went into the costuming was immensely evident. The writing, the directing, the acting - all incredible. The complex nature of humanity and themes of oppression coupled with privilege that were explored were thought-provoking and at times hard - in a good way, a needed way. I could sit here for days and wax poetic on the force of nature that is **all of** *Black Panther* and how you should run, RUN, not walk to see it. But instead I'm going to dig a little deeper and talk to you about something near and dear to my heart - the women of Wakanda.

The premise of the film – SPOILER ALERT – is that the fictional nation of Wakanda, in the middle of Africa, was never colonized. They have advanced technology and resources, due to the precious metal, Vibranium, and therefore don't necessarily need to exchange with other countries. In doing so, they can keep their true nature a secret and further push off colonization and westernization of their country.

This is *a lot* to contend with and unpack. Without getting into the full complexities of the film (more than happy to, DM me @chelsdd, let's talk!) this world positions race and gender, both together and separately, in a completely different way than what we currently know and experience.

First, let's dive into the power these women are given, or rather allowed to possess. In Wakanda, gender equality is alive and well. The idea of privilege imposed by western colonizers is virtually non-existent. Now I'm sure if I spent some time in Wakanda there would be examples of varying degrees of privilege, but as far as I can tell there is no oppression in Wakanda. There are no norms to be had when it comes to gender, class, race or sexuality. Therefore, women are allowed to be full humans- fully complex, fully themselves without apology.

As I write this I am painfully reminded or aware of the fact that as women we don't get to do this. We don't get to be ourselves without question or apology. We don't get to just make decisions and choices regarding our appearance, our behavior, our desires. Everything we do is questioned, criticized, and even politicized. That's for women as a whole … and it's even more of a reality for women of color, specifically Black women in America.

In *Black Panther,* the women are equal to men. They hold the same positions as men, receive the same titles as men, and accumulate just as many accolades as men - and sometimes more. All of this without a single batted eye. No question or thought of a question - it's just the way it is, and it's beautiful. The army is made up of only women. T'Challa – aka the Black Panther and King of Wakanda – always takes the General of the army, Okoye (played by Danai Gurira), on his missions, along with Nakia (Lupita Nyong'O) a Wakandan spy. T'Challa is constantly flanked by smart, strong, powerful, and emotional – yes that's a good thing – women. Although one of the driving forces of the film is T'Challa's relationship with his now

deceased father, it's the women in his life – and in Wakanda – that encourage, support, teach, and challenge him. His sister, Princess Shuri (Letitia Wright) is the tech-wizard of Wakanda. The nation has the advantages of Vibranium, which allows for many powerful advancements; however, it is Shuri who truly takes Wakanda's technology to the next level. She's supported by her peers, her family, and Wakanda as a whole. Even T'Challa's mother, played by the literal QUEEN that is Angela Bassett, is not a sit-and-do-nothing Queen. After her husband dies she remains poised and strong for her children and country.

The women are there, not as ancillary characters who serve as love interests or background characters. No. They are at the forefront of the film, with real, meaty roles that drive the narrative. At one point especially, the women are all we have. After T'Challa seemingly loses his defeat to Eric Killmonger (played by my #foreverBAE Michael B. Jordan) and is assumed dead, the women rise up. Nakia quickly races back to the lab with the Queen and Shuri in tow. She knows they have to leave, they have to proclaim a new King to fight Killmonger. She knows she must do what *she* feels right and serve her country by *saving* her country from this apparent threat. In the same breath, Okoye chooses to serve her country by acting as an aid to this new transition of power. At this moment, these two characters have a definite-Bechdel-test-passing conversation discussing these decisions and this core theme of the film.

These two women are feeling their emotions but realize that they need to take action, and they're deciding different paths. In that, we see not only the complexity of this story but the complexity, the depth and the strength of women.

The women of Wakanda are allowed to be smart, strong, poised, goofy, severe, feminine (whatever that means), powerful, and also they are allowed to love. These women aren't relegated to one emotion, one way of thinking, one way of life.. They're allowed to be who they are, fully, and in-turn are everything.

And the men of Wakanda benefit as well. The men are not threatened by the Wakandan women or women in general. It does not sever their masculinity to see women succeed and claim her power. In turn, these men are free to support and grow with the women. These men are "allowed" to embrace their emotions and "femininity" because those things aren't seen as inferior and "wrong." It's almost as if feminism isn't just about women but full gender-equality…and benefits EVERYONE. Hmmm…

Circling back to the intersection of gender and race … Because Wakanda was never colonized and tepidly interacts in Western and world culture, the people – but more specifically the women – of Wakanda are not subject to the western ideal of beauty. Throughout the film, we see various depictions of traditional (or a modern take on traditional) tribal clothing, beauty, etc., across many different African tribes. It's beautiful, it's diverse, it's Pan-African. And it's also something we rarely see depicted in mainstream media.

Natural hair is abundant and worn in many different styles. Braids – and the plethora of variations on the "braid" – are abundant. But also hair coated in red clay similar to the Himba people is shown, dreads in their many forms are showcased, shaved heads – fully and with designs – are the signature style of the all-female army. No one's face or skin is altered to fit into a western, Anglo-Saxon narrative of beauty.

The actors and actresses aren't just depicted as light skin either. There are extremely dark-skin actresses, medium-tone, light skin. It's a range of skin tones and everyone is represented, and celebrated.

It's amazing to see this world. To see what life for people who have been constantly and horribly oppressed for hundreds of years, would've been like if they'd never been colonized. If they'd never been ripped from their country and sold like cattle to the highest bidder. It's amazing to see how women, again women of color, would thrive without the barriers of the patriarchy AND the beauty standards forced upon them.

It's also amazing to see that this film tackles the fact that Wakanda is idyllic but the rest of the world is not. It's incredible that this is not only included but a central theme of the film. And a theme that is discussed early on between Nakia and T'Challa. Nakia wants the country to do more for the world because they can. It's a woman who firsts brings this to T'Challa's attention and a woman who is spearheading the efforts to bring aid, education, and resources to the rest of the world.

This movie is so incredible. I could watch it a hundred times more and continue to learn and be entertained. I feel so empowered watching this film, for many reasons. I feel empowered watching this diversity on screen because in a small way I understand the magnitude of this film for the Black community. For black women, black children, and especially little black girls who are seeing these gorgeous and diverse women own their bodies, their minds, their hearts, and their power. It's amazing and awe-inspiring. I cried in the theater multiple times and to be honest, I'm crying right now. I hope it inspires people – all people – to feel empowered and to embrace one another. To embrace diversity and change. To *want* to make our world more idyllic like Wakanda for men, women, and children of all races, creeds, sexualities, and more.