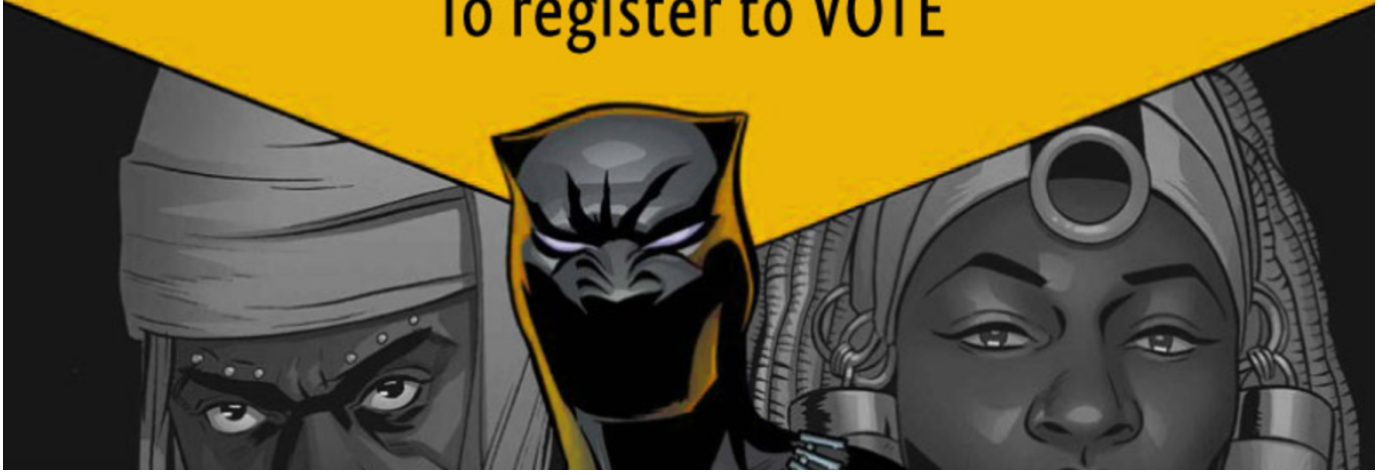


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poster from the Electoral Justice Project #wakandathevote program, centered on 2018 film *Black Panther*.

What 'Black Panther' Can Teach Us About the Civic Imagination

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"*Black Panther* is more than a movie—it's a movement." Taking such claims seriously may help us to understand the relationship between popular culture, the civic imagination, and social change.

Let's define the civic imagination as the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions. Research on the civic imagination explores the political consequences of cultural representations and the cultural roots of political participation. The civic imagination requires—and is realized through—several interrelated functions, including the ability to imagine what a better world might look like, to construct a model of change-making, to see one's self as a civic agent, to feel solidarity with others whose perspectives differ from one's own, and to belong to a larger collective with shared interests, among others. This definition consolidates ideas from various accounts of "the public imagination," the "political imagination," the "radical imagination," the "pragmatic imagination," "creative insurgency," and "public fantasy." Some see the civic imagination as grounded in beliefs about how the system actually works, but I have a more expansive understanding that stresses the capacity to imagine alternatives, however fanciful.

When my research group interviewed more than 200 young activists for our 2016 book, *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism* (Jenkins, Shresthova, et al), we found that activists around the world are appropriating and remixing popular culture to fuel their social movements. For example, some are painting themselves blue like the Na'vi in *Avatar* to rally for environmental justice or flashing the three finger salute from *Hunger Games* to rally against wealth inequality, gestures that are similar to the American founders who drew on Greek heroes and Roman orators, or

peasant rebels in Early Modern Europe who dressed as Amazons or Moors, or Civil Rights leaders who shared references to the Biblical Exodus. Each of these more remote narratives was widely invoked within the community seeking to foment change. We need shared stories that move us from personal to collective imaginings of social change.[1]

Like Peter Dahlgren (2009), we feel that “civic” has an affective and imaginative dimension: “The looseness, openendedness of everyday talk, its creativity, its potential for empathy and affective elements, are indispensable resources and preconditions for the vitality of democratic politics” (90). Compare this with Raymond William’s notion of the ordinariness of popular culture or Stuart Hall’s idea that popular culture offers resources the public can appropriate, remix, resignify, and recirculate towards its own ends. Hall (1992) tells us that popular culture is “profoundly mythic... a theatre of popular desires, a theatre of popular fantasies... where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves.” Just as it matters whether you are making your purse from silk or a sow’s ear, the quality of the raw materials matters: not every popular culture texts speaks for all groups and commercial narratives contain ideological elements that must be worked through—and read against lived experiences—before these resources can be deployed towards social change.

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The superhero genre deals directly with issues of power and its responsible use. Superheroes change the world and never doubt their capacity to make a difference. This political drama unfolds in bright primary colors, often lacking the nuances necessary to foster real-world change, but such fantasies provoke debates about possible alternatives to the status quo.

My research group has mapped many different deployments of the superhero genre by activist groups in the U.S. and elsewhere, including the use of Superman as an “illegal alien” by the Dreamer movement or the creation of alternative superheroes in support of women’s rights to education (Pakistan’s *Burka Avenger*), aboriginal rights (Australia’s *Cleverman*), or Russian militarism (*Guardians*). Critical race scholar Ta-Nehesi Coates (Atlantic, 2016) has spent much of the past few years writing *Black Panther* comics: “if you are a young man in West Baltimore and all

around you is a considerable amount of powerlessness, you probably have an attraction to people with power." With great power comes great responsibility.

Mapping *Black Panther* via core functions of the civic imagination, our research team has identified several potential points for intervention and détournement.



Screen image of Wakanda skyline from the 2018 film *Black Panther* (Marvel/Walt Disney Studios).

Before we can build a better world, we need to imagine what one looks like. *Black Panther*'s fictional Wakanda provides a vivid contrast to the poverty and hopelessness depicted in Oakland in the film's opening and closing scenes. Oakland was the setting of director Ryan Coogler's first film, *Fruitvale Station* and the birthplace for the Black Panther Party (no direct relation). Interestingly, the conclusion's agenda for social reform through community schools and health clinics owes much to the Black Panther Party's original platform. *Black Panther* is a Hollywood film which envisions utopia in an imaginary African nation where black peoples exercise self-determination, having no history of colonization, where Africans develop advanced technologies while controlling their natural resources, where traditions persist despite modernization, and where warring tribes have developed practices for resolving conflicts. The production design for *Black Panther*

adopts a pan-African perspective, merging iconography from many peoples and nations.

We need to imagine ourselves as agents of change. T'Challa undertakes the classic hero's journey, moving from the young prince to the ruler of his country following the death of his father, taking on new responsibilities, embracing an expanded mission, and learning to make a difference both at a local and a global scale. It is this acceptance of social responsibility that makes the character Black Panther such a great model for young activists.

We need to imagine what mechanisms might achieve desired changes. Killmonger is not a villain in a traditional sense: the film has sympathy for his goals, but differs over means. Killmonger's advocacy for the export of arms to help rebels overturn oppressors inspires the Black Panther's move from isolationism towards diplomacy and social services.

We need to identify the shared goals and interests of our community. A striking aspect of *Black Panther* is the range of different conceptions of power, courage, responsibility, wisdom, and knowledge within the Wakandan community. Unlike most superhero sagas, success rests on collective rather than individual action. Consider, for example, the film's different representations of black women: Nakia, who is on a mission to rescue captive women in Nigeria; Okoye, who experiences conflicting loyalties but remains true to her principles as leader of the Dora Milaje; Shuri, who embodies her society's technological and scientific advancement; and Ramonda, who carries regal dignity and deep-rooted traditions. These women clash but come together as their country turns outward and becomes a superpower dedicated to a more just distribution of resources.

We need to forge solidarity with others from different backgrounds. Having developed a stronger Wakandan community, Black Panther joins the Avengers, directing his newly claimed leadership against Thantos and his allies in *Infinity War*. Here, he fights alongside a Norse god (Thor), a Russian assassin (Black Widow), two World War II veterans (Captain America and Winter Soldier), and a scrawny kid from Queens (Spider-Man), to cite just a few. Each defends a different community, but they join forces against threats so big that they put everything they love at risk.

For those who are most oppressed and marginalized, there is a need to

imagine equality, respect, democracy, citizenship, and power before they are directly experienced. Here, we are drawing on theories of the black radical imagination, which seeks to explain why oppressed people take risky political actions in search of uncertain political gains. When, at the end of the film, T'Challa steps up at the United Nations in the face of sniggers and skepticism from other world leaders, he models what it means to demand respect that has not been granted you before.

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No wonder *Black Panther* captured the imagination of so many people this spring, offering a shared myth desperately needed in the age of Trump: the film inspired many different forms of participatory culture (memes, fan fiction, cosplay), as people fused its iconography into their personal and social identity.

How might we translate this collective imagining into the basis for social change? As Gabonese filmmaker Manouchka Labouba explained during an interview for our *How Do You Like It So Far?* podcast: "I remember…being a kid and female in Africa [that] the superhero that I imagined was a white male…because all of the superheros that I watched back then were white. Superman, Batman, Spiderman, all of them were white… It is important to have a character like [Black Panther] because it gives an opportunity for kids nowadays to imagine their superhero in a different way." And even though the film's producer, Walt Disney Studios, may be seen as a corporate "colonizer" by many critics, the story can nevertheless be appropriated and reconfigured through children's drawings, stories, and play.



More formally, organization like Define American, uses stories to “shift the conversation about immigrants, identity, and citizenship,” has partnered with other groups— Fandom Forward amongst them—to develop a study guide around the film’s representations of borders, refugees, immigrants, and national identity. Super-powers to the people!

In numerous ways, superhero blockbusters offer resources for social movements: because they are ordinary; because they can be appropriated and transformed so freely; because they constitute a realm where we might imagine alternatives to current social conditions; because they foster shared desires that may help sustain struggles for social justice; because they speak about feelings that might not be expressed in any other way; and because they may bridge cultural divides. Certainly, other stories—religious narratives, folk tales, historical epics—also perform some of these functions. But for many young people around the world, as our example of *Black Panther* illustrates, popular narratives are particularly valued as resources for the civic imagination.

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For more on the USC Civic Imagination Project, visit https://www.civicimaginationproject.org

Notes

1. The Institute for the Future tells us: “Any democracy requires a thriving public imagination, in order to make visible, sharable and understandable to all the people new ideas, new models, new potential policies. We cannot make any kind of collective decisions unless the collective can understand what is at stake, and envision where it may lead.”

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