

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 164, No. 34

Serving Chicago's legal community for 163 years

## 'Black Panther' is Obama take on Trump times

Superheros get political as fictional country argues over privilege, treatment of refugees

**B**lack Panther" is what happens when Simba from "The Lion King" grows up to be James Bond.

The Black Panther character, made his first appearance in 1966, moments before the edgy, Afrocentric, Oakland, Calif.-based political group arrived on the scene.

Director Ryan Coogler read the Black Panther comics while growing up in Oakland, the setting of his two earlier films ("Fruitvale Station," "Creed"), long before he ever dreamed of attending the film school at USC.

Now Coogler's "Black Panther" is a \$200 million action movie based on a black superhero, drawing from hundreds of cultural references, cinematic tropes and shared experiences, to create a satisfyingly epic whole.

"Black Panther" takes place in the mythical African kingdom of Wakanda, South Korea, London and, of course, Oakland.

Isolationist Wakanda is rich in the meteoritic mineral vibranium. Hoarding its precious resource, it consciously remains hidden from the world, neither offering nor

receiving aid of any kind.

Despite its economic stability, Wakanda is in political transition. Its king has been killed in a London terrorist bombing and now Prince T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) must prove he is worthy of the throne and the vibranium-infused Black Panther bodysuit.

Vibranium creates both wealth and discord in the kingdom. Should Wakanda share its bounty with the oppressed? Open its doors to refugees?

T'Challa's lifelong friend and lieutenant W'Kabi (Daniel Kaluuya, "Get Out") framed the problem this way: "You let refugees in, they bring their problems with them. And then we'll be like everyone else."

Others believe Wakanda has a moral obligation to share its riches.

Wakandan tribal council leaders, too, each have an agenda. Internally and externally, the challenges to T'Challa's authority are relentless. He has a lot of fighting to do, with or without the vibranium suit.

Fortunately, he has a village.

T'Challa is supported by wise elders, his mother Ramonda



**REBECCA L. FORD**

*Rebecca L. Ford is counsel to Scharf Banks Marmor LLC, and concentrates her practice on complex litigation, compliance, board governance and specialized employment issues. She is the former executive vice president for litigation and intellectual property at MGM. She can be reached at [rford@scharfbanks.com](mailto:rford@scharfbanks.com).*

(Angela Bassett), and the shaman Zuri (Forest Whitaker).

His sister Shuri (Letitia Wright), a technical genius (like Q in the Bond series), keeps him tricked out in high-tech vibranium gadgetry.

His guards are an elite group of women, the Dora Milaje, who are headed by the fiercely patriotic Okoye (playwright and actress Danai Gurira).

Antihero Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan, in his third Coogler film), is alone in the world. A product of the Naval Academy at Annapolis, MIT and the Navy Seals, Killmonger is as physically fit and ruthlessly destructive as the Terminator. His torso is decorated with what look like tribal scars, but are actually welts from the notches he cuts into his chest whenever he makes a kill.

A complicated guy, Killmonger's brutal, hyper-masculine worldview is a reflection of the brutality and loss he has suffered in his life. He believes his goals to be virtuous, but by anyone's reckoning his means are not. Because the system — Wakandan, American, you name it — won't let him win by the rules, he takes matters into his own hands.

T'Challa has met his match. Andy Serkis plays the villainous

South African Ulysses Klaue, a Killmonger ally, as a rugged ruddy mercenary. Serkis is usually disguised under computer-generated effects in motion-capture roles such as Gollum in the "Lord of the Rings" series. As the unmasked Klaue, Serkis shows off his range as an actor in full.

Martin Freeman, best known as Bilbo Baggins from the "The Hobbit," is the sympathetic American CIA agent, Everett Ross.

Internet wags joke that Serkis and Freeman are the movie's "Tolkien white guys."

Little do they know.

"Black Panther" is fueled by its acknowledgment that there are many points of view and passionate disagreements among the African diaspora.

The Afrocentric theme is a fresh twist to the well-flogged action genre, in which yawning audiences have learned to take for granted threadbare plotlines, over-the-top gore and ubiquitously padded computer-generated effects.

Yet it's the movie's political currency that accounts for its broad appeal. "Black Panther" taps into moral debates that are taking place all over the world, from margarita bars nestled in the shadow of the border wall, to the halls of the UN: Populism vs. globalism, exceptionalism vs. inclusion, technology vs. tradition.

T'Challa's priestly deliberative Obamaesque style contrasts starkly with Killmonger's get-it-done remorselessness, resonant of Trump.

And in the micro-ecology of the American movie theater, loyalties are bound to shift.

Stay tuned...

(Before diving into the movie, those who need to brush up on the Black Panther characters and storyline should visit the Vice.com cheat sheet, "Everything You Should Know before Seeing 'Black Panther.'")