

## WAKANDA FOREVER: THE OFFICIAL BLACK PANTHER PODCAST

### “Chapter 5: Letitia Wright, Tenoch Huerta, Dr. Gerardo Aldana”

#### Final Transcript

[He Was Everything from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I've now seen Wakanda Forever three times. There's a lot to absorb in terms of its story, visuals, music, and performances. We've heard from director and co-writer Ryan Coogler and his cast and crew about all these things over the course of this podcast. But after three viewings, I'm struck by something both more shallow and more profound: beauty.

[Time To Consider from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

White supremacy, the system which enabled the descendants of Europe to steal an outsized portion of this world's labor and land, has always been tied to a specious notion of beauty. You see, a criminal power cannot merely exist; it must justify itself. The natives are lazy and thus must be made to work, the Africans are pagan and thus must be given the light of our Lord and Savior, these “Little Brown Brothers” aren't fit to govern themselves; it is the white man's burden to save them. That each of these false flags serve to enrich the colonizer is, we are told, merely a side effect.

Other false flags are rendered merely as adjectives: "lustful," "warlike," "stupid," "ugly." These words are not furnished as mere insults but as sanctifiers of pillage and plunder. Black people are nappy-headed, dark, big lipped, and flat-nosed, and thus deserve to be plundered of their labor, to be shot down in our streets, to die first in our movies.

[MUSIC STOPS]

[Suit Up from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

[Additional Instrumentation by Pat Mesiti-Miller]

And so what does it mean that Wakanda and Talokan give us a beauty created not to justify enslavement but to celebrate freedom? We should really take a moment to acknowledge that Winston Duke's M'Baku can be considered an object of beauty. Only a generation ago, Hollywood would have seen him very differently and ditto for Okoye, Nakia, Namora, Attuma, Ramonda, and our main characters: Shuri, who takes on the mantle of the Black Panther, and Namor, the Feathered Serpent God.

[Namor Arrival from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

On this episode, we dive deep into the beauty, complexity, and nuance of Shuri, Namor, Wakanda, and Talokan with actors Letitia Wright and Tenoch Huerta and cultural consultant Dr. Gerardo Aldana.

My name is Ta-Nehisi Coates, and this is Wakanda Forever: The Official Black Panther Podcast.

[Boat Battle from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

A few months ago I unpacked all of my old comics from the 80s. I think like half of them were some version of X-Men. It's not hard to see why.

[FBI Bridge from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

The X-Men were mutants, a race feared and hated by the rest of humanity. In my mind, mutants were Black. What other experience of repression could they possibly be pulling from? As it turns out, quite a few. Depending on where you sat, mutants were Jewish, mutants were gay, mutants were Native American.

The first mutant to ever exist in the Marvel Universe is Prince Namor. Pointy ears and winged ankles aside, Namor is generally depicted as a white man. This is not unusual. While mutants in the Marvel Universe are a diverse bunch, some of the known ones—Cyclops, Wolverine, Iceman, Angel—are all white men.

[MUSIC STOPS]

I love a lot of these characters, but I have to admit, it's always been a little hard to buy the super-powered white guy as the object of pogroms and genocidal violence. Namor, or N'amor, doesn't have that problem in Wakanda Forever.

[Chak from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

Instead you see a mutant emerging not out of genetics but out of the crucible of oppression. Whereas mutants in Marvel Comics are born, in Wakanda Forever, they are made. And that history is not a side-story. It's the entire story. It explains Namor's rage, his desperation, and the path he takes which eventually leads to a collision with Wakanda.

[MUSIC STOPS]

As production designer Hannah Beachler and costume designer Ruth E. Carter mentioned in previous episodes, this was tricky terrain. Namor and the Talokanil are tied to the experience of enslavement, but they are anchored in Mesoamerican history and Mayan culture, not the Black experience as Wakanda was in the first film. We live in an era where the West is finally beginning to reckon with how much of its legacy is built on the capture, dismemberment, and exploitation of other cultures. The phrase de jour for this phenomenon, "cultural appropriation," always felt stale, given what it was trying to describe. When Cleveland's baseball team proclaims itself "the Indians" or when Loretta Lynn claims to be a "squaw on the Warpath," they aren't "appropriating," so much as enjoying the spoils of conquest.

[Chak from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

To make sure this construction of Namor and the world of Talokan wasn't part of this tradition, Ryan and his crew sought out people who knew more than them, people like Gerardo Aldana, professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and actor Tenoch Huerta. Gerardo was a cultural consultant on the film and Tenoch brought Namor to life on-screen. I spoke with the two of them about the difficult task of crafting fiction out of a painful history. But first, I asked Tenoch about the reaction to the film in his own country.

[MUSIC STOPS]

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

**Tenoch Huerta:** Well, the people is happy with this. They feel strongly represented. For example, now in the city, Mexico City, there are like three murals with the character, you know, representation of the character.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Wow. Have you seen them? Have you got to see them?

**Tenoch Huerta:** Yeah, yeah, a couple of them. And, you know, the people is sending me message kind of, "Hey man, I feel proud of myself. Or my baby is looking at me in a different way, my kids." And the kids are feeling better with themselves. There is a fantastic story. It's a little boy in a toy store, and he take a Namor doll, and he say, "This is my dad. He's like my dad." And his mom is saying, "No, no, no, no, no. Your dad is more ugly than this," you know, "and this toy is beautiful."

But, you know, apart from the joke, the thing was this is the power of representation. The kids finally are seeing themselves and seeing their parents and grandparents and all the members of their community represented in toys, in a movie, these murals. But it's not this craziness that, you know, that the people is like, "Oh, it's just because it's an actor, or it's a big movie." No, no, no. It's something deeper. It is going directly to their hearts, and it is helping to heal historical wounds.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Mm, mm.

**Gerardo Aldana:** Yeah, I mean, I feel like that was the huge kind of gamble, right? Like, Ryan really was playing five-dimensional chess with this movie because first and foremost, no question, it was about Chadwick Boseman, it was about grieving, it was about something that we all needed to go through. And you can't take that away. But the amount of effort and, like, everything that went into creating indigenous representation was a film in and of itself, right? And I think that's what's coming through. People are seeing that it's not just a — it's not a prop.

Like, my greatest fear when I was approached to work on this was that it was going to be indigeneity as a prop, which you see everywhere, right? Oh, they're exotic. Oh, they look cool, neat headdresses. And that was not it from the very beginning. And you see the result of that. You see that when you put that time and effort into creating these rich characters, like the whole scene, right? You see Attuma, but you see Attuma also in the palace with his regular, everyday clothes on. You see people in the marketplace. You're seeing them as real rich individuals, not just, you know, kind of a prop. And I think that's the level that was the gift to indigenous and Latino communities that Ryan pulled out because it could have just been about what Black Panther needed and what that audience needed. But he went so much further.

**Tenoch Huerta:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** What was the importance of him rooting it in — actually, I'm going to back up. I'm going to back up. Gerardo, will you help us out? Because I think we want to be very, very specific here. There are a lot of terms that, you know, I've seen just doing the research for, you know, this interview, and I just want to, you know, be clear that we're speaking correctly and using the right terms. If you could define, like, what we are going to be referring to when we talk about Mayan culture, what we're going to be referring to when we talk about Mesoamerican

culture, how that is differentiated or within, you know, the broader Latin American world, and then, finally, how we even got to the name Talokan or Talokanil. Sorry, I know that's a lot.

**Gerardo Aldana:** Yeah, that's a —

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I know that's a lot, but it's going to bracket the rest of this conversation, so I think it's important.

**Gerardo Aldana:** Right on, let's go. All right. So Mesoamerica is that region from northern Mexico to, like, central Central America. And it's because they all — in pre-contact times, they all shared a lot of the same practices, a lot of the same intellectual tools, astronomy, all based on maize agriculture, right? So there's common traits that connected them all in that region and that distinguished them from folks further north and further south. So Mesoamerica is basically what we call that region in pre-contact times.

And when we talk about Mayan culture specifically, we're getting into that region that is southern Mexico, it's Chiapas, it's Yucatan, Campeche, Quintana Roo, and then down south to Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, parts of El Salvador. So you have that smaller hunk, which is Mayan, but it also has its phases. So it goes from, like, an earlier phase, a formative period, to a classic stage to a post-classic stage.

And all of that sets the backdrop for 16th century and contact with the Europeans. But it also, and this is a really fun part for me, and I can't wait to get your thoughts on this, Tenoch, but very early on, Ryan and I were talking about then how that fits into cosmologies, right? So how did Mesoamericans in this region, how did they understand the world, the universe that they lived in? So we were talking about, you know, like underworld, the middle world, the celestial realm. You know, it's like three layers. It's anchored to a locality. And so, in that space, you have communities that live in these three realms. And in the underworld, it's not just everything below the surface of the earth. It's the communities that live down there.

And so we were talking about, okay, there's some examples of this. We go to a place called Teotihuacan, which is not Mayan, but it is from the same time period, and it's near Mexico City. And there's these murals there that depict life in the underworld. And there's an image that we refer to. It's not actually the same language. They didn't speak Nahuatl, we don't think, at Teotihuacan, but the place was called Tlalocan in Nahuatl by the Aztecs.

And so we were talking about that, like it's a paradise in the underworld, right? It's the afterlife, but it's this fantastic afterlife, and if you were to go there in your sleep, you might not want to wake up because it's so fabulous. So it's just, like, this wonderful place. And Ryan's like, "Yeah, that's it. That's what we're talking about because going into the ocean is also going into the underworld."

So we're talking about people who go into an alternate realm. They're going into this different cosmological space to now live.

So we were saying, okay, so Tlalocan is the kind of the idea, but it can't be Tlalocan because that's the Nahuatl term, and we're talking about a Yucatec community. So we had this fantastic, like, coincidence that in the Dresden Codex, which is this hieroglyphic manuscript from like the 13th century, there's an example of a Nahuatl word written in Yucatec Mayan, and it's Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli that's written as Tawiskal. And so I said, "All we have to do then is say that this Yucatec community knew something about Tlalocan, but they were pronouncing it

Talokan, so that it fit their language and it fit their representational style.” So, like, “Okay, great, Talokan.”

Then — and I want to know if this is true or not — Ryan comes to me, and he's like, "Hey, Tenoch says that, you know, he doesn't really look totally Mayan. So, so can he possibly be mixed? Can he be, like, mixed indigenous?" And I'm like, "That's perfect because if Tenoch's, like, father's family is Pochteca, then what that means is that they're these, like, mercenary spies from the Aztec Empire, and they come out, and they live in Yucatan, and then his mom is Mayan. So he's like this mixed indigenous race.

And then it gets even better because once they go into the underworld, and Tenoch is like — or not Tenoch, Namor — Namor's like, "Hey, I want to know about my dad. I want to know about his community," she's telling him all these stories about what he would tell her, and he talks about Tlalocan, which becomes Talokan. So then you end up with the final name. He's, like, inspired by this father that he never knew, this paradise in the underworld, and that becomes the name of what he wants to build.

**Tenoch Huerta:** Yeah, totally. It was a fantastic exercise to work with this enormous historical heritage. And we did all these games because, yeah, of course my features are not Mayan, but my family comes from the central of the Mexico and Michoacán. So it's different features, but it works, you know?

And, at the same time, I want to make the distinction between this world, Mayan and classical world, pre-Hispanic, which is how it's built this whole movie, and the indigenous that are living today in our territories. It's different, you know, because the indigenous today, they are suffering a lot of oppression, racism, classism, and it's a cultural holocaust. I can compare it with that. You know, they have been systematically destroyed, all their culture. And it's important to make this distinction because at the end, even though I have an indigenous heritage, like everybody, like everybody else or almost everybody else in Mexico and Latin America, I can't name myself indigenous because, in our territory, it doesn't matter if you have a blood because it's not in your blood. It's cultural.

I can't say I'm indigenous because, culturally, I don't practice their ways. I don't speak their languages. I don't live in the community. I don't practice the culture. So it's impossible to name myself indigenous. I'm mixed, or mestizo. It's a political category. It's not exactly about your blood. It's, again, cultural. So I'm mestizo. I'm mixed. And we are representing an indigenous group, but it's 500 years old.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Right.

**Tenoch Huerta:** You know? So it's important, but that doesn't mean that the current indigenous and the mixed people in Latin America can feel represented. I mean, they can feel connected. They can recognize themselves because, at the end, we have the same root. We are talking about the ancient — an ancient root, 500-years-old root. So we create something from that period, but, yeah, just to be respectful.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** No, no, Tenoch, actually I really, really, really appreciate you doing that, and I really appreciate you clarifying that. I think it's actually tremendously, tremendously important, and it frankly — it leads down an even more interesting — like, I have so many questions coming out of even what you just said. And the first I would ask is: do you have any sense of

those who would define themselves as indigenous, like what their actual reaction to the film has been? Do you have any sense of that? And, Gerardo, please feel free to chime in if you do, too.

**Tenoch Huerta:** Well, I receive messages from people from Yucatan, and they are happy with the movie. And there was a fantastic story about a guy, he went to the movies with his grandmother.

**Gerardo Aldana:** Yes.

**Tenoch Huerta:** She's Mayan, and she started to translate —

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Oh no, really? Wow.

**Tenoch Huerta:** — the movie to him. She was saying, "Now they are saying this, they are saying that, they are..." blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So that's, that's beautiful. And in L.A., there are many, many indigenous groups, of course migrants. They migrate from all Latin America to States, and they stay in L.A. And the Mayan group in L.A. say, "Hey, it sounds beautiful." It's like, "Okay, you have an accent. You can't lie to me. You have an accent, but I love it. It sounds good." And they are happy with that, you know? That's important.

And, for me, it was really important. It's like, okay, guys, I'm not pretending to be something that I'm not. I just want to honor who you are, who we are because, at the same time, we share the same root. You know, in Spanish, they say "mis viejos abuelos," you know, "my ancestors."

**Gerardo Aldana:** Yes.

**Tenoch Huerta:** So I'm just trying to honor my ancestors. We share ancestors. I'm just honoring them. And if you feel represented as indigenous or as mixed or whatever, it's beautiful.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Gerardo, have you had a chance? Have you seen much reaction from the indigenous community to the film?

**Gerardo Aldana:** Yeah. I mean, I love that story, too, because when I heard that, I felt like I was going to cry, you know? Like, an abuelita just translating for her family the lines, and so it's just gorgeous. But I think that there's a sensitivity to this notion of identity and who's being represented in what ways built into the film itself, again. So I think — I think Ryan nailed this, too, right? The scene at the hacienda when he's just a kid, and he sees what's happening, like, that is a representation of the colonialism that sets the conditions for what indigenous people are experiencing today.

So indigenous communities are going to feel seen because there's that representation showing, oh, like, don't forget what happened to us, right? It's not that we disappeared. It's not that, you know, everything's fine now. There was something very significant that changed the course and that made something like Talokan possible, which is because we're engaging that whole — like the Afrofuturism concept, right, alternative historical futures.

We're saying, "Now, what if we could imagine indigeneity that still persisted without colonial impact," right? That opens up a whole new world, a whole new way of thinking. And that kind of freeing of the imagination is another thing that I think a lot of folks are responding to, right? They're saying, "Oh, man, like, I don't always have to think of myself as colonized. I don't always

have to think of indigeneity as being that thing that we lost." Right? There's still something to be inspired by, and that's the part that just blows me away.

And it's continued again, right? So Ryan doesn't just stop there, doesn't just stop with, like, ancients and then Talokan and then colonialism. He brings in — when Nakia goes and speaks to the elder in that community. And so you're seeing, like, modern indigenous people living the way that they do, right, which, yeah, there's — there's definitely challenges. There's definitely poverty. There's definitely extractivism in these regions. But there's also something that's beautiful about being in those spaces.

[Talokan Revisited from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

I mean, I think he totally captures that in the memorabilia hut. I don't know what they eventually end up calling it, but his little space, right? Namor doesn't create this massive palace or museum for all of his stuff. He's got this little traditional Yucatec hut with a thatched roof where he keeps, like, everything that's precious to him. And, and I don't know, I mean, watching the scenes where he just goes in there, it just feels so comfortable, feels so familiar that it just blows me away because you're capturing, on the one hand, the violence and the challenge and, at the same time, the beauty and the humility of being in those communities. I just feel like, you know, he knocked it out of the park.

[MUSIC SWELLS THEN FADES OUT]

**Tenoch Huerta:** What Ryan did, he jumped to the root, the very first moment where we were broken. He jumped in that moment. And that's beautiful because it represents all of us. It's like the same tree and different branch. So each branch, Mexican American, Mexicans, actual Mexicans, Latin American people, indigenous people, all of us, we have the same root, the same first moment. You know, it's like the Black diaspora.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That's exactly what it's like.

**Tenoch Huerta:** And you can speak about the Black people in the States now, the Black people in Europe, the Black people in wherever you want, or you can jump 500 years ago and speak about this fantastic and strong culture and how the colony — colonies — colonialism —

**Gerardo Aldana:** Colonialism.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** We'll take it. We get it. We get it.

**Tenoch Huerta:** Colonialism — break it, and then it — you know, everything happened. So it's basically the same process. He jumped to the very first moment, and then he create all this narrative from that moment. That's why everybody can feel represented.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Tenoch, it's interesting that you said that, though, because that's kind of, I think, what happened, actually, with the first Black Panther because, you know, for the root, for us as members of the Black diaspora, it is Africa. By going back to the root as he did with Wakanda in Africa, it allows Black people in America, Black people in the Caribbean, as you said, Black people in Europe and Black people in the continent to see themselves in that root. And so it's a very, very, you know, powerful thing. I understand what you mean there.

I want to ask a somewhat delicate question, and I don't know if you guys have had people in your orbit who have had this reaction, but it is a superhero movie, and in superhero movies, people fight. And certainly one of the reactions that has come back to me is, "Why are these two groups fighting each other? Why can't they get together and go?" You know what I mean? You know, beat the — you know, the colonizer, go beat the — you know, why, why — it's very difficult for people to watch the second — for certain — you know, certain people, a common reaction, "It's hard for me to watch that second half of that movie and see, you know, them fighting each other."

And I will confess, you know, one of the things, like, I — you know, obviously I, you know, am a huge Black Panther fan, but I was in there — you know, I found myself rooting for the Talokanil, you know what I mean? Like, I didn't know where — like, you know what I mean?

Like, I didn't know what side I — you know, there's that great scene where Namora goes, and she — she stops the sonic weapon that's coming out of the ship. And she's so ferocious with it, and I was like, "Go, go, go!" you know, cheering for her, you know what I mean? And so it's a very interesting thing — you know, to figure out which side you're on. And so I, I — I'm curious whether you guys have encountered that reaction at all, in terms of people not quite knowing how to feel about the violence and the fighting.

**Tenoch Huerta:** Well, I think it's a reflection of what is happening right now in the world.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yes, it is.

**Tenoch Huerta:** You know, it's not about just our communities. It's about the world. And in terms of, yeah, if you are talking about racism and antiracism, of course you have these two groups, especially in the United States. These two groups, they are they fighting to have a place, and you are fighting to have a recognition. So something that is really, really tricky and really evil from the system is you have two or three minorities and just one place.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Right.

**Tenoch Huerta:** And they have to fight each other to have that place instead of change all the system because there are place, there are room for all of us.

**Gerardo Aldana:** So, I'm going to be honest, it was the — the very first draft of the script that I read. I was like, "You know, Ryan, I could be totally out of bounds here, but I just feel like, what are we doing? Because the way it reads, it's like the oppressed battling the oppressed, and then one of them loses." And, like, what does that — how do we even, like, celebrate that? Yes, it's going to be great to have this incredible representation of indigeneity, but then what message are we sending?

And I feel like, I mean, I struggled with that a lot. And I feel like we had conversations about that concept, too. It's conversations about power. It's conversations about abuse of power in what form. And here you have these two communities that have singular powers, powers that no one else on the planet has. What's your responsibility for responding to that state? And so I feel like, again, we get back to that, like, five-dimensional chess because there's really a second massive storyline. Yes, the first storyline is about grief, but the second storyline is allyship. It's like allyship is not kumbaya. It doesn't have to be like, "Everything is beautiful, let's just make it work."



**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That's right. That's right.

**Gerardo Aldana:** No. I mean, the stuff that they're saying about each other, the way they're going at each other, you hear those arguments from people on the streets, like, dealing with it every day.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That's right, that's right.

**Gerardo Aldana:** It's totally real. And in the end it still comes out that, yes, it's much more valuable for us to come together and to experience power in a different way than to just go the colonial abuse of power route. And that, to me, is what's really, again, like, so rich about the film. It's not trying to say, okay, allyship is, you know, we get together, everything's good, we're perfect harmony. It's like you've got to have those tough discussions. You've got to have those emotions that are raw that come out.

And, and so I feel like, on the one hand, it's represented in the film. That's allyship. That's finding a way to work together around a common need. But what was brilliant to me was that that's the experience that I had in the making of the film, right? Like, this was an alliance. This was brilliant Black artists who were doing this project, and then here they are inviting Chicanos, Latinos, people of color, of different communities into this space. And it didn't feel like it was awkward. It didn't feel like it was, you know what, here we go, we're just going to kind of paint this over. Like, it was genuine collaboration. And that, to me, is the allyship on the inside that probably gets reflected in the film itself.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. That's — I mean, I know, just here in North America, you know, we have to — you know, we always struggle to hold, like, the fact that a complicated history between indigenous Americans — and I should say in the United States, not in North America — in the United States, the complicated history. We had a history of Cherokee slaveholders here. We also had a history of African Americans going west to — you know, as, quote/unquote, "Indian killers," you know? And it's difficult. You know, we don't always like to talk about it, but that is — I think one of the strengths of the film is it does not abandon allyship. It doesn't abandon it, but it also doesn't, you know, paper over the fact that, you know, this comes with challenges.

[Namor Arrival from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I took this job not just to randomly interview people in a movie that I love but to really, really learn. And maybe more than any of the interviews I've done, and, you know, we've done quite a bit, this has just been tremendously, tremendously educational for me. I kind of vaguely knew what it would mean for Ryan to do the film this way and who he chose and how he dealt with Namor, but you guys have definitely added a whole new layer to it. And so just, personally for me, I just want to thank you guys. I know you guys are very, very busy. I appreciate you guys, you know, taking the time to talk to us today.

**Gerardo Aldana:** No, no, I can't thank you enough, Ta-Nehisi. And Tenoch, honestly, like, from the very beginning, Ryan said, "Yeah, we're thinking about Tenoch Huerta for this role." And I was like, "Oh, that's been in my mind the whole time. This guy's going to do it." So, it's just an honor to meet you two. Thank you so much.

**Tenoch Huerta:** It's the same. It's the same, Gerardo. Honestly, I wanted to say thank you for all your effort, for all your passion, for all your heart and your mind and your knowledge in this

movie. You did something beautiful, and you did something to feel proud of. Honestly, man, you and all the advisors, all of you are changing many, many lives —

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yes, indeed.

**Tenoch Huerta:** — in the deepest way possible. And honestly, maybe we're going to die and never measure how much you are touching the life of the kids and the new generation.

[Yucatan from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

So thank you. Thank you for the invitation. Thank you for the place and the opportunity to speak with the people. And go, please, go to the movies!

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Go to the movies.

**Tenoch Huerta:** And watch Black Panther: Wakanda Forever on Disney Plus.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** All right. Thanks, guys.

**Tenoch Huerta:** Thank you.

[Vengeance Has Consumed Us from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

[Suit Up from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I want to pick up on something from the last part of my conversation with Gerardo and Tenoch, that sticky concept of allyship. I've heard more than a few of my friends remark that they did not know what to do with the last half of the film, when the Wakandans and Talokanil are at war. Instead of fighting their common enemy, they fight each other. The result: long set pieces constructed out of Black on brown and brown on Black violence.

These scenes are both thrilling and repulsive. The choreographed violence draws you in, but the fact of who's doing the violence to who leaves you covering your eyes. Comic book movies are premised on escapism, and yet this aspect of Wakanda Forever feels way too real.

There's something more: That Talokan and Wakanda end up fighting reflects the very real history and difficulties of allyship. It's not that Wakanda Forever abandons the notion. It just refuses to paper over its difficulties. My buddy, journalist Adam Serwer, says that, "Ryan Coogler wants us to feel bad about violence." When I shared that with Ryan, he agreed and told me:

[MUSIC STOPS]

"I've seen a lot of violence in my life. And it's awful."

[Music from Pat Mesiti-Miller]

Perhaps no character in the MCU more wrestles with the problem of violence than Black Panther. He was introduced in *Captain America: Civil War*, pursuing vengeance only to abandon it. Then in his own movie, T'Challa is faced with an enemy created by the very father he sought to avenge. And in *Wakanda Forever*, Shuri's foe represents an entire civilization endangered by her brother's decision to reveal Wakanda to the world.

So nothing is simple in Wakanda on or off-screen. Letitia Wright returned as Shuri, but with an entirely different burden to carry. To play the role, Letitia endured a grueling 10-month shoot and the death of her spiritual brother Chad. Moreover, she had to show the world that she was capable of taking on the transition from comedic little sister to Queen to Black Panther.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I know you've been talking, and actually we've been talking a lot in the podcast with other people about the pain from which this comes, and I don't want do too much of that. I saw you say something about how every time you have to do it's a little triggering. So I got a kind of goofy question for you, but it's a serious one. I mean, it's going somewhere. I'm not just like joking about this.

**Letitia Wright:** Alright, bet.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** But have you — like, I just saw this, like literally about an hour ago. Have you, like, seen the TikToks about you?

**Letitia Wright:** Ooh, man, what a way to start. I have seen the TikToks.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** What do you think?

**Letitia Wright:** I'm really shocked by it. It's definitely, flattering, you know? But I'm really shocked because I just wanted to — I always just play Shuri and tell the truth. And with the first one, everyone really saw her as really funny and really cool, and I wasn't trying to do that on purpose. I just wanted to tell the truth of her personality and her spirit. People really took to that. So that wave of reaction of "Wow, she's really cool, funny, inspirational," I really loved it. And then this time around, it's like the cool and the funny and the inspirations, the foundations are still there, but —

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Right. No, is they doing something else.

**Letitia Wright:** But something else is happening.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** A little something else. It's more. It's a lot more.

**Letitia Wright:** Something else is happening. It's a lot going on. I researched that. I saw the hashtag of my name is at 500 million views on TikTok.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Jesus. Wow.

**Letitia Wright:** So, listen, I just played the character.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Did you, like — just tell me — can you tell me just a little bit about your dramatic background, like when you started acting?

**Letitia Wright:** Yeah, for sure.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Like, how old were you when you started acting?

**Letitia Wright:** Like 12.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Okay.

**Letitia Wright:** I was about 12.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** And how old were you when you were like, "I think this is the thing."

**Letitia Wright:** 17.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Okay. Because acting is such a visual medium, I wonder — and I ask you specifically, also, as a Black woman, and I'm thinking about this in reference to what we were just talking about — I wonder how you pictured yourself. I wonder what your view of yourself — like, did you think of yourself as, like, beautiful?

**Letitia Wright:** Wow.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Was that, like, a thing, a way that you perceived yourself?

**Letitia Wright:** To be honest, no, because of the ways in which I was pretty much bullied in school for my size, for how I didn't look like the other girls. I, quote/unquote, wasn't "developing" in the ways the other girls were in terms of their bodies. And I struggled with that for many years, and I just thought something was wrong with me until I kind of let that go.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** How did you let it go?

**Letitia Wright:** I think I just kind of talked myself out of the idea that I should be like anyone else. And it was either I was going to live with the way that I was fearfully and wonderfully made or not and struggle to be something else that I wasn't. And I think there are certain women in the industry who have embraced who they are and their beauty in ways that has empowered me, you know?

Seeing an interview of Viola Davis saying, "Listen, going to the monitor to check my mascara, that has nothing to do with my character. Am I telling the truth?" And I started to study those, those interviews at a very young age. And then I just put it in my spirit that it's about the craft, like it's about the truth. And alongside that, as I was growing up, that self-acceptance and that beauty of who I really am on the inside just started to shine through. So I guess that's what people are feeling right now, you know, not only — you know?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. I mean, that's the interesting thing So you go through that struggle. But like I said, I mean, when we started, you know, this interview, you know what I mean, it's a — it's a very fascinating thing because I came out here — I actually think it was before the premiere, and I was — you know, for another set of interviews for the podcast, right? And I was driving down one of these streets in West Hollywood.

**Letitia Wright:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** And I see these gorgeous character posters for Wakanda Forever, and it was, like, so striking. And I'm a little older than you, and so what that means is for all of my childhood, who could be beautiful and who could have glamour bestowed upon them? With a couple exceptions, like, maybe Denzel, Halle Berry, you know, it would be like one or two at a time. But to see, like, a whole, like, row of y'all, you know?

**Letitia Wright:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** And y'all looked beautiful. Like, it was like — I filmed it and, like, sent it to people like, "Holy..." because they were out everywhere like that. Like, it was — like, I was, like, "I can't believe I'm alive to see this." I literally mean that.

**Letitia Wright:** Wow. Thank you.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Like, when I was young, like when I was, you know, 10, 11, 12, like, this would've been all white, you know what I mean?

**Letitia Wright:** Yeah, for sure.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** And so I just — I wonder how it feels to see that, like to — you know, and especially given what you just said, you know?

**Letitia Wright:** Yeah. It feels like you're in something that's really transitional. And, like, when I say that, I mean, like, times are changing, you know, where we're not being told that we're not good enough or we're not accepting that. So I feel like I'm in this weird place where, as a Black woman, I'm moving into a space where I'm finally being called beautiful. But I didn't wait for them to tell me it first. I told it to myself, and that's for everyone on the cast, as well. And that inner beauty is transcending, and that's inspiring others. So it feels — it feels great, though, you know, The TikTok thing is a lot, you know?

I put — I put — I put, you know — it's — I see it as really flattering, and I'm really grateful that, you know, someone's saying, "Wow, like, this person's really beautiful. Like, we have a crush on her." Like, that's really cool. I've never been crushed on before. In school, I got bullied for how I looked. But alongside that, just being a part of a franchise and a production that champions Black beauty, not on a vanity sense, though. That's — like, the beauty that you're seeing is from within. It's not about going on set and putting on this makeup and — like, literally, we don't even have a bunch of makeup on. Like, we literally just —

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Wow, you don't, huh?

**Letitia Wright:** It's not — it's literally nice and simple, you know? It's the inner journey. It's that inner beauty of who we are that's shining through. You know, Black Panther — I'll be honest with you, Black Panther, the first film, it helped me realize and understand how beautiful it is to be African.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Wow.

**Letitia Wright:** I'll be absolutely honest. These are things in school, like when you're going to school, people are bullying kids for being African. And then you're taking in the psychology that that's wrong, you know? And you're comparing yourself towards some — this is our homeland.

This is the motherland, this is precious, and we didn't know that as children. When I was growing up, I did not know it

[Suit Up from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

until my dad is bringing me books about Black scientists and inventors. I'm learning about the first Black woman to go to space, the first Black person that made hair products, Madame C.J. Walker. Like I'm learning these things, and Black Panther being a part of that and seeing how the diaspora has just really just embraced it helped me to go and dive into who I am, you know? Where am I from in Africa?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Ryan — and I got to make sure I say this correctly. It's the only time I'm going to look down at this paper. Me and Ryan actually talked about this a little bit, and it's actually a very, very important point. We were looking at the box office figures for Wakanda Forever, which now is at, if I'm reading this right, almost \$700 million worldwide. This is the highest-grossing movie where the lead character is a Black woman, and it's you.

**Letitia Wright:** You're going to make me cry. Wow.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Like that's — that's a thing. And that's a lot of money. That's not a small amount to be like — how's that feel?

**Letitia Wright:** Man, yeah, I've not like processed it a bunch because I'm just like — I'm just taken back by it, you know, the ways in which the first film was so well received. And I'm sure there were so much doubts. So I'm sure they didn't think or didn't know if we could, and we just had faith that we could, and we didn't really do it for the numbers. And I know — and I know my brother never did it for that. I know we did it for the culture. We did it for purpose, and then the numbers just added to that to prove the point that we are worthy.

And this time around, it's really surreal because I knew that even though the circumstances is incredibly difficult, I knew that at the end of it I would have to face that fact that I've been blessed to represent Black women as the first Black female superhero lead in a Marvel Cinematic Universe film. And I knew that sentence would come out of my mouth eventually, but I just was too scared to talk about it. And I just had to lock my head down into the work and dedicate the film to my brother and be there.

I'm still processing but I feel emotional because it's just like, I'm, like, a young kid from Guyana. You know, I'm just a young girl from Guyana that just had this dream, and a few people gave me a yes. Like Ryan and Chad just gave me a yes, you know? Ryan being such a sensitive soul and also a brother that really just trusted me on this one to join him on this journey to honor our brother and trust me in the ways that probably some people may have never done and fought for me. And for you to say that is — there's a lot happening right now.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I know. I know. I can imagine. It's a lot to absorb. How did you — how did you find out once it was decided that you guys would go forward —

**Letitia Wright:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** — that it really was going to be you, that you were going to be the lead? How'd you find that out? Because there are any number of possibilities for how this could have gone.

**Letitia Wright:** Man. I think it was Danai and Daniel Kaluuya. They were like first responders when bro passed, and I woke up to some disturbing emails. And I was just like, "Everyone's tripping, and I'm going to call Chad." So I'm trying to call Chad, and I was on the phone to Daniel at the same time. He's like, "Tish, the family," and I kind of just lost it. And I was like, "I'm not doing this without Chad." I'm like, So that's done then. You know, we're not — I'm not doing that. And it was really Danai and Daniel that was like, "Tish, I don't know, but you might have to do this, Tish." And I was like, "What?" I was like, "No."

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** But can I just push back a little bit?

**Letitia Wright:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I mean, because the obvious thing people would say is, in the actual comic books, that's what happens.

**Letitia Wright:** I know.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah.

**Letitia Wright:** I know. And I know that there's a world where we wanted to do both, and there was a world where Shuri gets to do that alongside her brother.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Got it.

**Letitia Wright:** And that's —

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That's the world you wanted.

**Letitia Wright:** Even not having that is, like, eating me up a lot. The love that Shuri has for T'Challa is the love that Letitia has for Chadwick. And that's intertwined, and it's really hard to imagine a world where she has to go through that, and I have to go through that without him. And Ryan said he wanted to speak to me, and I spoke to him, and he was, like, just basically talking me through the ways in which we could do it. And I was, like, getting ready to be like, "I'm out. I'm gone."

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Right, right.

**Letitia Wright:** And he basically said that he also saw a poem I wrote for Chad on my Instagram page. It's got like a million views or something. But I couldn't write a statement. I didn't know how to, like, type words. I can only speak. And I would, like, record stuff when everybody went to bed and take stock images and piece it together on Final Cut and speak over it and talk about the ways in which, poetically, as best as I could, this was — I was processing that. And he's like, "I heard that, and I feel that the emotional arc, the emotional journey of what Shuri's feeling, that's the lens in which we're going to do this." And we didn't even get to the Black Panther part yet.

And for the first time, because it had been like two months after Chad had passed, for the first time, I was a little bit relieved that that would be the ways in which I could contribute because I was really hurt. And for the first time it was like every bit of pain that you feel right now, you're

just going to pour it into her, and that's how you're going to heal. And then we got to the Panther part.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah.

**Letitia Wright:** And I was like, “Okay, I'm going to still process that as I'm doing the film because it comes later on in the journey.” But it was really Ryan that helped me believe in myself. I struggled with that because I knew it would happen eventually, but I thought it would happen with my brother being here. And Ryan could tell that I just felt insecure, and he would shut down every single doubt, every time. He would purposefully encourage me the way that my brother would, you know, to be like, “You are enough. You do belong in this space. This is not a mistake.”

I always felt like, “Man, you know, I'd rather my brother just be here, you know?” And we know that that's, like, really tough for all of us. But even though we were hurting, Ryan had enough strength to just pick me up, you know, like literally pick me up and be like, “I'm not going to let you just sit here and not see that you could do this because if your brother believed in you when you walked into that audition room that you were his sister, and I believed in you, we're still — I'm still holding that same belief in you.” So that's how I got to process slowly but in a healthy way how to — and I don't really want to see — I don't really walk around being like, “I'm the lead of this.”

I see it as, “I'm a vessel. I'm a trusted vessel that's here to honor my brother alongside someone that I love who's Ryan alongside Angela Bassett, alongside Danai, Lupita, like, you know, and Winston, everybody.” So I never carried that with like, “I'm leading a film.” I just carried the essence of, “I'm here to be a vessel. I'm here for purpose and to honor.”

And Ryan really helped me with that. If I'm wearing the suit, you know, for the first time, we would huddle in a circle — myself, Ryan, Nate, Lupita, Winston — and we would bow our heads, and we would just give honor to Chad and be like, “Bro,” you know, we're just praying like, “Bro, Tish is about to do this. Be with her.” That meant everything for me for him to take the moment out to be like, “Let's huddle to support you as you do this,” because it is hard. The adventure and the fun of it hasn't — it hasn't set in yet. It's still the pain of it. And —

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Was it ever fun?

**Letitia Wright:** It became fun. There were times where it was fun. Again, Ryan, just being that big brother of support and love, if I wear the suit — when it's time for me to wear the suit and walking, he's like — he'll literally be like, “The Black Panther's on set.” Like, please don't do that. He was just like, “Have you read the comic books? There is T'Challa the Black Panther and Shuri the Black Panther. Like, your brother is proud of you.”

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Right, Right. Right. Yes, yes.

**Letitia Wright:** Like, “Stop being intimidated. Stop — stop downplaying it.” He'd be like — he's like, “Namor and the Black Panther are having a conversation. This is a big movie. Turn your phones off.” I'm like, “You could just say Shuri!” He's like, “Right now, the Black Panther and Namor are having a conversation.” And, you know, fun moments of being in the suit was, like, just being on set with M'Baku and just having that scene, having that moment.



**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** You know, when I was — I had the great fortune of being here in LA and in New York and seeing it at both premieres, and, man, because the movie's so heavy, that part where — and I think it's what you talking about, when you come out the ship —

**Letitia Wright:** Yeah.

[Black Panther Lives from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** — like, people lose it. Like, they really, really, really, really lose it. And I hadn't peeped this until Ryan pointed it out to me, which is that y'all send Chad off in the ship, and then you come back down out of the ship. I was like, man.

**Letitia Wright:** Ryan, dang. That's the first time I'm putting that together, as well.

[MUSIC SWELLS THEN FADES OUT]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** So you started off, you know, you were talking about, you know, being younger and seeing Viola Davis and how her words affected you. And, like, you're now — you're in the Viola Davis position for somebody that's young. And how's that feel?

**Letitia Wright:** Wow. Oh, man, it's so funny that you mentioned that. I just sent Ryan a video of this father going into a room where his two little girls are dressed up as Shuri, and I think the little girl, maybe she looks about like three, and the other one looks about six or seven. And the six and seven-year-old is, she's doing the Shuri painting on her little baby sister's face. And they basically get caught. And they look like Shuri in the comic books as the Black Panther.

And that, for me, is just full circle. And that makes me feel very proud. I feel — I feel that I've done something meaningful in the world. And I'm — I just pray it continues. I pray that when it's their turn for them to inspire another young girl, you know, the ripple effect, the chain effect of that continues. And I'm proud that those little girls feel beautiful and empowered and to understand that they can access their emotions, they can process, they can be — you know, they can be all those things and beautiful at the same time. So, honestly, I'm really proud of myself and proud of us as a team to put that type of energy and that type of messaging out there.

[Warrior Falls from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** No, you've done — you've done something really significant. Like, you're trying to be true to something, as you said, dedicate your performance to something. People still got to come and see it and watch and feel entertained. Like, all of that has to be on point, and y'all really did it. So congratulations. You should be proud of yourself.

**Letitia Wright:** Thank you. Thank you, bro.

[MUSIC SWELLS THEN STOPS]

[VOICEOVER]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I'll confess that that last interview with Letitia was one of my favorites. She came to the studio in Los Angeles where we met, glowed up and glamorous, a full on leading lady for the MCU, the biggest franchise of our time.

[Music from Pat Mesiti-Miller]

I don't mean to keep harping on the various firsts and the boundaries being broken, but in a warming world where democracies teeter and viruses roam unchecked, with so much wrong, this is a thing that is going right.

And it's not small. Our art and politics are entwined. Birth of a Nation wasn't just a racist film that birthed modern cinema, it also birthed the second Ku Klux Klan. Policy was the brick and art was the mortar of that older world, and it will be the same for this one.

That said, the world of Birth of a Nation enjoyed the luxury of lying, of erasing human beings with all their intricacies and differences and painting them in black and white. This world of Wakanda, the new world, has no such advantages. Any real interrogation of allyship means an interrogation not just of what oppresses but of what we are in our most private moments. That's not always endearing. It's awkward. It shames us. It hurts. Because it's true.

[MUSIC STOPS]

[Funeral Ceremony from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

By the way, we talked about box office results in my interview with Letitia. As of this recording, Wakanda Forever has grossed more than \$800 million and counting.

On the next episode, we reach the end of the journey to make Wakanda Forever and talk to some people who have been part of this since the very beginning.

Nate Moore...

**Nate Moore:** It was like, "Oh, man, if we blow this, we are going to make it hard for movies like this to get made."

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah.

**Nate Moore:** Because you go, "Well, they were batting 1,000 until they made Panther." And, luckily, the reverse happened.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Simone Ledward Boseman...

**Simone Boseman:** And those are things that I see in the character that I know are Chad, too, right? In a lot of ways, it's like Chad was being prepared his whole life to play that role because T'Challa's character is his character.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** And Ryan Coogler.

**Ryan Coogler:** Having had conversations with Stan Lee about him, like, Stan Lee was like, "Yeah, I made him perfect, like, for all the racists out there." Like, he was like, "Can't say nothing."

I'll be back next week with another chapter of Wakanda Forever: The Official Black Panther Podcast.

If you like the show, be sure to follow, rate, and review it on your favorite podcast app, and tell your friends and loved ones to do the same.

Learn more about our journey at [ProximityMedia.com](https://ProximityMedia.com) and follow @ProximityMedia, @Marvel, and @MarvelStudios on Twitter and Instagram.

[Welcome Back from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]

Wakanda Forever: The Official Black Panther Podcast is a production of Proximity Media in collaboration with Marvel Studios and Marvel Entertainment.

The series is written and hosted by me, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and produced by Paola Mardo. Executive Producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, Sev Ohanian, and Paola Mardo. The film score is composed by Ludwig Göransson. James Kim is our Story Editor. Our Audio Editors are Cameron Kell and Cedric Wilson. Sound design and additional music is by Pat Mesiti-Miller. Lauryn Newson is our Audio Engineer. Polina Cherezova is our Production Assistant.

Special thanks to Octavia Ridout, Adam Cole, Susan Mueller, Lydia Ward, Courtney Archerd, Natalie Meade, and the Proximity Media team.

The character of the Black Panther was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. Black Panther: Wakanda Forever is co-written and directed by Ryan Coogler. It is produced by Kevin Feige and Nate Moore and streaming only on Disney+.

I'm Ta-Nehisi Coates. Thanks for listening. I'll meet you back here next week.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[Welcome Back from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever Score by Ludwig Göransson]