

## Utopia & Dystopia in Postcolonial Constructions of Place

Iker Olandesca  
*Denison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Olandesca, Iker () "Utopia & Dystopia in Postcolonial Constructions of Place," *Articulāte*: Vol. 29, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol29/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articulāte by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

# Utopia & Dystopia in Postcolonial Constructions of Place

Iker Olandesca

...

At first glance, the blockbuster sci-fi film *Black Panther* and the nonfiction novella *A Small Place* may not seem like they have much in common. *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler, is a fantastical cinematic depiction of a fictional African nation—Wakanda—untouched by colonization and almost completely immune to postcolonial conditions. As a consequence, Wakanda not only has the capacity to sustain itself, but also has the potential to liberate the entire African diaspora. The film operates as an imaginative media piece digestible and enjoyable for, rather than critical of, all audiences. On the other hand, *A Small Place*, written by Jamaica Kincaid, is a jeremiad text critiquing the postcolonial condition of Antigua and everyone involved in it: the colonizing Western outsiders and the colonized Antiguan peoples. Through its highly critical lens, colonization is presented as a source of great shame for Westerners and a source of great suffering for Antiguan.

What, then, bridges these two texts, when they are seemingly disparate in nearly every aspect? One is textual, nonfictional, and critical; the other is cinematic, fictional, and imaginative. It is a shared underlying principle: they both artistically construct place in ways that explore, negotiate, and challenge “Eurocentric” norms of storytelling and history-making (Mafe 2023), whether it is Wakanda in *Black Panther* or Antigua in *A Small Place*. By doing so, these media pieces

serve as postcolonial texts, even if they approach their unique postcolonial project from different standpoints—one optimistic, even utopian; the other pessimistic, even dystopian. *Black Panther* creates a utopia that aims to imagine an alternative future of a non-colonized society, and *A Small Place* creates a dystopia that aims to critique and resist the postcolonial condition.

Coogler's Wakanda in *Black Panther* functions as a utopia and furthers the postcolonial movement by imagining and even modeling positive, progressive futures for postcolonial societies. To understand the utopian elements of *Black Panther*, one can turn to Gregory Claeys' work distinguishing between utopia and dystopia. Of Claeys' definition of utopia, four components are most useful for our understanding of the film. First, utopia is comprised of, though not reducible to, a certain reconstructive "mentality" that questions normative structures and reorders them in more "satisfactory" ways (Claeys 150). Claeys describes this as an "[investment] in the future" or the "concept" of the future, to compensate for the ways in which the present is "deficient" (Claeys 150). Second, utopia is defined not by the level at which its infrastructure is advanced or futuristic, but instead by the ability of its sociocultural structures to foster community among its people (Claeys 155). For example, a busy kitchen during the holiday season may at first not seem utopian, yet its communal, synergetic energies transform it into a utopia. Third, utopia creates among its inhabitants "enhanced sociability"—that is, sociocultural structures within which individuals feel supported, uplifted, and integrated into a larger community (Claeys 151). Finally, utopia, especially in "literary utopianism," may feature "fantastic projections" that "verge on the utterly impossible;" however, they must also to some extent be realizable and conceivable in objective reality (Claeys 148). It is these elements—a reconstructive mentality, communal

socio-cultural systems, enhanced sociability, and realizability—that constitute a utopia, according to Claey's.

All of these utopian elements can be observed in *Black Panther's* Wakanda. The utopian mentality of reconstructing pre-existing structures is manifested in a literal, visual reconstruction of an African nation that seamlessly combines advanced technology and indigenous traditions in its institutions. For example, Wakanda is designed to be an integrated mix of glistening technology, lush greenery, and patterned, traditional design (Coogler 00:13:19-00:13:40). Similarly, T'Challa, the king of Wakanda, uses advanced military equipment such as Kimoyo beads and a teeth necklace that transforms into armor (Coogler 00:38:00-00:40:09), with designs that pay tribute to African jewelry making practices (Taylor 2023 and Camera 1993). Notably, it is this *integration* of technology and tradition, the reconstruction of normative systems, that makes Wakanda utopian, not merely the presence of technology in itself. Beyond reconstructivism, Wakanda's sociocultural system is predicated upon its isolationist principle, which builds a sense of communal identity. T'Challa posits in a conversation with Nakia that Wakanda is "not like other countries," and if they were to open their borders to the world, the people "could lose [their] way of life" (Coogler 00:33:28-00:34:34). This implies that the Wakandans have a strong sense of identity in opposition to outside countries, and that their identity is so integral to the nation's structures such that revealing it could result in the nation's demise.

Regardless of the veracity of T'Challa's beliefs, Wakanda does have enhanced sociability, the third component of a utopian world. Wakandan people find their individual purpose, as well as group support and identity, in their tribe, whether they are in the military Dora Milaje (Coogler 00:14:26-00:14:32) or the defensive border tribe (Coogler 00:34:48-00:35:47). Even if they are part of different tribes,

most Wakandans are connected, as illustrated in the kingship battle ritual (Coogler 00:19:51-28:30). They have shared dances, chants, rituals, and beliefs. Even the Mountain Tribe, which expressed dissatisfaction with Wakanda, still respects the outcome of the battle ritual, because they are integrated into Wakanda as a whole (Coogler 00:27:03-00:27:47). Finally, as much as Wakanda is fantastical, it has some amount of realizability and applicability to modern times. When Killmonger, a Wakandan-born American, returns to exact revenge on the Wakandans and Westerners who did him wrong, he explains how a Wakandan empire can liberate the African diaspora through transnationally dispersed military resources (Coogler 01:29:49-1:39:19). This suggests—objective veracity aside—that there is potential for a Wakanda-like utopia to take form in the real world if African societies had the resources to do so. This potentiality gives Wakanda a touch of realizability needed for a utopian imagination of place.

Because of Wakanda's reconstructivist integration of technology and tradition, internally communal socio-cultural system, enhanced sociability, and potential for implementation in the real world, it fits within Claeys' definition of a utopia. Further, by functioning as a utopian world, Wakanda helps catalyze a positive, possible future for postcolonial nations (Suchocki 59). Historically, there are various examples of the artistic conceptualization of utopias leading to the concretized implementation thereof. Vivien Greene notes how, for example, a utopian story by journalist Edward Bellamy in 1888 inspired the creation of real-life communities following the principles of the society he imagined (3). Another case in point: utopian socialist Charles Fourier's imagination of community became integrated into the planning of utopian settlements such as Utopia, Ohio in 1844 (Greene 3). Although these may be antiquated examples, they help establish the transformative effect of utopia on the

construction of socially advanced societies, which can be productive for the advancement of postcolonial societies.

Whereas *Black Panther* uses utopian elements to create a constructive imagination of place, Kincaid's characterization of Antigua as a dystopia functions as a critique of colonization and the postcolonial condition. As a result, the text furthers the postcolonial movement by breaking the silence around pain and suffering. To discern the dystopian elements present in *A Small Place*, we turn again to Claey's, who provides four components of dystopia that can be useful for our understanding of the novella. First, dystopia is characterized by political and societal structures that utilize punishment and fear to control individuals' behavior (Claey's 156). The result is a "repressive society" where people's freedom and access to resources are infringed upon (Claey's 162). Second, because of this fearmongering and restrictiveness, individuals become alienated from each other (Claey's 156). Where, in utopias like Wakanda, people find support among each other, in dystopias this characteristic is not present. Bonds between people are weak; "friendship and trust" are greatly diminished (Claey's 156). Third, dystopias are not usually intentional; they simply "happen" (Claey's 160), usually against the creators' and/or inhabitants' will. This is in opposition to utopias like Wakanda, whose goals and ends are deliberate. Finally, dystopias, especially in the literary sense, are meant to blatantly lament the loss of freedom in the face of insurmountable institutions such as political systems and imperialist projects (Claey's 172). These components—systemic punishment and fear, alienation among inhabitants, unintentionality, and lamentation of loss—constitute a dystopia in Claey's definition thereof.

In Kincaid's characterization of Antigua in *A Small Place*, one can observe dystopian elements at play. Although Antigua is chronologically past the times of English colonization, colonizers

certainly used punishment and fear to control Antiguan, and such psychological and cultural damage might even still be lingering in the present day. Kincaid describes the “destruction of people and land” from colonization: a punishment Antiguan suffered only because they were non-English, and because they had to be controlled as a colony (24). Colonizers controlled Antiguan’s speech and language, and punished them for violation of language laws (Kincaid 25). Even their movement was being controlled in establishments on Antiguan soil (Kincaid 27). To the present day, Kincaid describes how Antiguan are taught in “Hotel Training School” to be “good [nobodies]” and “good servants” (55). I would describe this as insidious fearmongering and control, though not blatant, because refusing to partake in such a system can result in the threat of diminished employment opportunities. Kincaid also states that Antigua feels like a “prison,” implying that different dimensions of social systems present in the nation have an underlying sense of fear, restriction, and control. The second dystopian component of interpersonal alienation is also present in Kincaid’s Antigua. Kincaid laments that Antiguan do not get along in harmony, but instead “imprison and murder each other,” “corrupt [their] societies,” and act like “tyrants” (34-35). Individuals are not economically uplifted through communal resources; instead, they must resort to corruption (Kincaid 59). These examples are a few of many that illustrate the lack of sociability and harmony among people in dystopian Antigua.

The third component of Claeys’ dystopia is its unintentionality. Although not directly stated by the book, one can safely assume there was nothing deliberate on the Antiguan’s side about being colonized and entering a desolate postcolonial condition. Unlike Wakanda, whose ends of prosperity and abundance were deliberately strived for and achieved, Kincaid’s postcolonial Antigua manifests ends of inequality and corruption that were and are

certainly not contrived by Antiguan but are suffered by them regardless. Finally, Kincaid's creative act of writing *A Small Place* and characterizing Antigua in this way makes her Antigua a literary dystopia, a blatant "statement of loss" in the face of uncontrollable hegemonic institutions (Claeys 172). Kincaid writes:

"...what I see is the millions of people, of whom I am just one, made orphans: no motherland, no fatherland, no gods, no mounds of earth for holy ground, no excess of love which might lead to the things that an excess of love sometimes brings, and worst and most painful of all, no tongue" (31).

The long list of inadequacies cements this section and the entire novella as a jeremiad for loss. The items that she lists here, specifically, also relate to larger systems over which she has no control: geographical borders, land ownership and control, social systems, and linguistic systems. This sense of helpless agony makes *A Small Place* a literary dystopia.

Kincaid's characterization of Antigua as a society permeated with fear and alienation, and its inadequacies as unintentional but painful regardless, keeps *A Small Place* in alignment with Claeys' definition of a dystopia. Moreso, by constructing Antigua as a dystopian society, Kincaid contributes to postcolonial activism due to the political efficacy of dystopian imaginations. As Libby Falk Jones asserts, conceptualizing dystopias 1) gives voice to the anguish of the dystopia's creator, and that of the people represented by the creator, 2) pushes for the urgent "need" of resistance and revolution, and 3) acknowledges the "courage and beauty" of those willing to speak on issues of inequity and injustice (11). Kincaid can accomplish these aims through her dystopian characterization of Antigua, critiquing and resisting Western impacts and imaginations of the Antiguan nation.



In this paper, I have explained how *Black Panther*'s Wakanda and *A Small Place*'s Antigua function as utopia and dystopia, respectively, and how each of these imaginations of place serves postcolonial activist projects in unique ways. Although each text, by virtue of its functioning as a utopia or dystopia, has great value as a standalone piece of postcolonial media, there is also value in reading them side-by-side. Together, both texts function as a damnation of the "white man's burden," a colonialist concept that white people have to "[civilize]" and nurture non-Western people, because they are "degenerate" and incapable of sustaining themselves (Said 52). According to this hegemonic ideology, Europeans have a "life-giving power" that they must generously bestow upon the "silent and dangerous" colonized country (Said 57). With the aid of Europe, the East then is "[represented]" and "[animated]" (Said 57)—it is unable to achieve self-expression and autonomy on its own. These white supremacist notions are condemned and challenged by constructions of both Wakanda and Antigua in different ways; together, they demolish the argument of the "white man's burden." *A Small Place* illustrates the objective impact, destruction, and ruination caused by white colonizers invading a nation, arguing that colonization is detrimental rather than beneficial to the oppressed nation. *Black Panther* depicts how advanced, well-developed, and nurturing a non-Western, African society would be if it were untouched by colonization. Put together, the two texts assert the argument that white colonizers have no right or need to physically and psychologically invade nations, not only because they are inhumane and ineffective at disseminating their systems, but more importantly, because these nations are perfectly capable of flourishing on their own.

Postcolonial texts such as *Black Panther* and *A Small Place* are vital to our reckoning of the postcolonial condition, which is burdened with the histories and legacies of colonialism. The brutal physical and

psychological violence incurred by this system—which has historically existed in more blatant forms yet contemporarily manifests in insidious, neocolonialist structures—deeply impacts ways of thinking and being for postcolonial communities in the global arena. On this transnational stage, postcolonial nations are set back by such painful histories and are compared to colonizing nations along the binary of developing or developed. Postcolonial nations and their colonizing observers often wrestle with the question of when the former’s gap between *developing* to *developed* will be reached. I argue that such a binary should not exist in the first place, and it is the ever-evolving process of becoming, of nation-building, that is more productive for the postcolonial movement. As this process of postcolonial identity unfolds, texts such as those previously described are vehicles of imagination, inventiveness, and creativity, which, as described by Leela Gandhi, can work to implement a psychological and cultural “departure from the colonial past” (6). These new visions of the postcolonial world can take many forms—dystopian texts, utopian films, and all in between—and, when consumed and read together, fill in each other’s gaps to produce a rich discourse of postcolonial imaginations, theorizing, and activism.

### Works Cited

- Camera, Lucille. “The History and Aesthetics of African Jewelry.” *Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute*, Yale University, 1993, [teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/files/93.04.02.pdf](http://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/files/93.04.02.pdf).
- Claeys, Gregory. “News from Somewhere: Enhanced Sociability and the Composite Definition of Utopia and Dystopia.” *History*, vol. 98, no. 2 (330), 2013, pp. 145–73. *JSTOR*,

- <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24429650>. Accessed 15 Dec. 2023.
- Coogler, Ryan. *Black Panther*. Disney+, 29 Jan. 2018, <https://www.disneyplus.com/video/0784106c-c677-40f2-b2ca-b856c637c0ee>. Accessed 15 Dec. 2023.
- Gandhi, Leela. "After colonialism." *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Columbia UP, 2020, pp. 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003116714-1>.
- Greene, Vivien. "Utopia/Dystopia." *American Art*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2011, pp. 2-7. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.1086/661960>. Accessed 15 Dec. 2023.
- Jones, Libby Falk. "BREAKING SILENCES IN FEMINIST DYSTOPIAS." *Utopian Studies*, no. 3, 1991, pp. 7–11. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20718920>. Accessed 15 Dec. 2023.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *A Small Place*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.
- Mafe, Diana. *Postcolonial Literature and Criticism*. 2023, Granville, Ohio. Taylor, Julie. "How African Beadwork Changed the World." *Google Arts & Culture*, Google, [artsandculture.google.com/story/how-african-beadwork-changed-the-world/AwICquz59QfIKg](https://artsandculture.google.com/story/how-african-beadwork-changed-the-world/AwICquz59QfIKg). Accessed 15 Dec. 2023.
- Said, Edward W. "ORIENTALISM." *The Georgia Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1977, pp. 162–206. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41397448>. Accessed 15 Dec. 2023.
- Suchocki, Majorie. "UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA: THE PRAGMATIC VALUE OF VISIONS." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2003, pp. 53–60. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27944274>. Accessed 15 Dec. 2023.