

## AVERTING THE DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY: SHURI, THE BLACK FEMALE SUPERHERO

Superheldencomics bieten sich als attraktive Ressource für den Fremdsprachenunterricht in Klassen mit hoher Diversität an. Sie fesseln Jugendliche unabhängig von Geschlecht oder ethnischem Hintergrund und versprechen Action, Heldentum und Identitätsbildung. Während sich viele Superheldencomics im Rahmen von rigiden Stereotypen bewegen, erzählt die etablierte nigerianische Autorin Nnedi Okorafor in ihrem Marvel-Comic *Shuri: The Search for Black Panther* (2019) eine andere Geschichte über schwarze Superheldinnen, weisse Superhelden, Geschlechterbeziehungen und über Afrika. Mein Artikel zeigt das Potential dieses Comics und skizziert Möglichkeiten für seinen Einsatz im Englischunterricht auf der Sekundarstufe.

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In her ingenious and witty comic book *Shuri: The Search for Black Panther*, the award-winning Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor cleverly interweaves a Black female African perspective with existing Marvel characters and settings. Together with artists Leonardo Romero and Jordie Bellaire, Okorafor, who is best known for her fantasy and science fiction novels, has refashioned the character of Shuri in both timely and unconventional ways. Shuri first appeared in a series of Marvel comic books in the early 2000s as the sister of the Black Panther superhero. She recently gained renewed prominence through the highly successful 2018 *Black Panther* film directed by Ryan Coogler. I argue that by giving centre stage to the young Black Shuri as superheroine, Okorafor averts the danger of a “single story” in the heroic universe, which so far has not only been dominated by (White) male superheroes but has also been pervaded by Western imaginaries. “The single story” according to the Nige-

rian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is the dominant, defining story told from a position of power. Its danger – especially if told over and over again – lies in the fact that it creates stereotypes and preconceptions which are not necessarily wrong, but certainly incomplete and therefore rob certain groups of dignity (Adichie 2009). It is my claim that, as a necessary alternative to the single story of superheroes, *Shuri* has much to offer to English language teachers at secondary level who aim at combining language teaching with intercultural learning and who are looking for teaching resources that cater to the diversity of learners in their classroom. My article discusses the precious gems in *Shuri* and details their value for the English classroom.

Set in Wakanda, a fictional, technologically highly developed, African state rich in a rare natural resource called vibranium<sup>1</sup>, *Shuri* sees the tech-savvy princess send her brother T’Challa, Wakanda’s ruling Black Panther, on a space mis-

<sup>1</sup> For more information on vibranium see <https://comicvine.gamespot.com/search/?i=&q=vibranium>, for more information on the character of Shuri in the Marvel universe, see for example <https://comicvine.gamespot.com/shuri/4005-58997/>.

sion. When T'Challa's space shuttle fails to return in time, Shuri is asked by her mother, Queen Mother Ramonda, to step into his shoes. Shuri, however, refuses this call for leadership and sets out to find her brother instead. On her way she encounters a giant grasshopper called the Space Lubber, who has a dangerous habit of travelling through black holes. While Shuri manages to ward it off, she realises that in order to reverse the black hole it has just left behind, she needs a partner who is good at maths. Her ideal choice is none other than Iron Man, who she asks to come to Africa to work with her. Together, they accomplish their mission and save the world – at least for the moment. It transpires that the Space Lubber is still at large and Shuri – reluctantly – comes to accept the fact that she has to inherit the mantle of the Black Panther in order to deal with it, which she does in her own way in the sequel (Ayala et al. 2019).

### No longer “about my brother first”: The young Black superheroine claims her space

Shuri offers gender models that prominently include women of colour and are characterised by active, responsible individual choices and agency. The ensuing gender relations in the comic are based on collaboration on equal terms. The centre of gravity, as befits a superhero comic, is Shuri the Black female superhero herself. This in itself is worth noting, given the scarcity not only of women but of women of colour in this role. The past few years have seen a gradual increase in female superheroes of colour (Sawyer 2018). Even so, they remain extremely rare. This trend is the same for women in general. It is only as of 2016 that Anna F. Peppard detects an upsurge of ongoing Marvel titles that star female superheroes after almost fifty years of great scarcity. And yet, “the newsworthiness of female superheroes proves that it is still far too unusual to see superpowered girls and women doing what real girls and women are doing every day: fighting back, and saving the world” (Peppard 2017, 131). This sudden taking centre-stage and the power and responsibilities that come with it are reflected upon from a

female point of view in the comic itself through the question of the Black Panther's mantle. When it becomes evident that Shuri's brother T'Challa, the ruling Black Panther, is not going to return any time soon, the Queen Mother Ramonda calls a secret meeting of women called the “Elephant's Trunk” who urge Shuri to fill the void left by her brother, a void that some women fear will destabilise the country. To her mother's dismay, Shuri point blank refuses the highest position of power in Wakanda. It is worth looking at Shuri's line of argumentation here:



Fig. 1: Okorafor and Romero 2019, ch. 2.



Shuri's call for male help is by no means that of the stereotypical damsel in distress, but is based on her rational assessment of the situation.



Fig. 3: Okorafor and Romero 2019, ch. 1

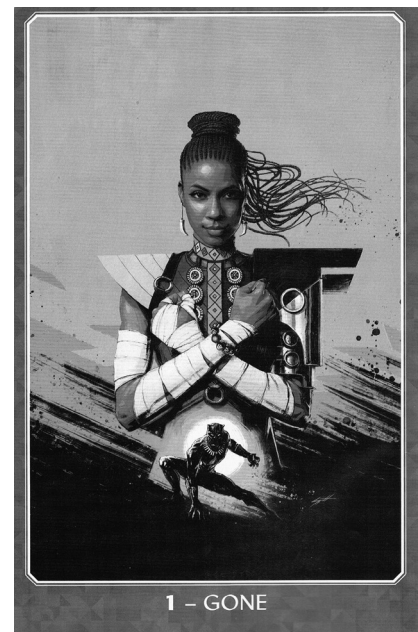


Fig. 2: Okorafor and Romero 2019, ch. 1, title page

This scene is preceded by a scene from Shuri's childhood. When she was only seven years old, she saved her older brother's life at the exact spot of today's meeting by shooting a snake in the high grass with a slingshot. While back then she was praised for saving the (then) next king of Wakanda, her excellent shooting skills received no mention. She was reprimanded for secretly observing her brother train. Shuri complains, "It was always about my brother first. He was the right gender, plus he was the oldest" (Okorafor and Romero 2019, ch. 1). The visual rendition of the present scene on the day her mother asks her to literally wear her brother's suit emphasises links between the past and the present, showing that her childhood memory is still potently present. Shuri tries to explain to the women of the Elephant's Trunk that she will not be (ab)used as a substitute for her brother. For her, continuing this patriarchal legacy is stifling and potentially lethal, a dead end. In this space she is neither seen for nor acknowledged as the person she is (a young woman, a skilled shooter, and a scientist). At stake here are questions of gender and the ways in which they are linked with traditional values, notions of filial duty, even systems of national governance and relations

- Shuri's powers include anamorphism which allows her to transform into a flock of birds – a power which she will temporarily lose in the near future. Her recently built nanotech wings, collapsible into a can, will partly make up for this loss.



to the rest of the world – all of which are subject to the debate of the Elephant’s Trunk meeting. True to the name she goes by among her ancestors, “Ancient Future”, Shuri is intent on finding a new tradition, even though for the moment this means disappointing, if not publicly disavowing, her mother. She steams off in quite a teenagerly manner and proceeds to turn into a flock of birds and fly away.<sup>2</sup> Having Shuri as the superheroine, who is easily relatable to a young audience, move out of the shadow of her brother and negotiate her own place, Okorafor rebalances the superhero universe in favour of agentic women of colour who have the potential to serve as progressive role models.

### Shuri teams up with Iron Man: “If the two of us put our heads together...”

Among the new traditions Shuri establishes in this universe is her choice of male partner in action and the ways in which she collaborates with him. Once the universal danger of the Space Luber’s habit to leave black holes behind literally opens up before her in Timbuktu, Mali, she knows she can solve the problem “with a little help” from someone “smart enough to double-check my math” (Okorafor and Romero 2019, ch. 4). “That guy” she kimoyo-calls<sup>3</sup> to act by her side in the final battle is Tony Stark aka Iron Man.

Her call for male help is by no means that of the stereotypical damsel in distress, but is based on her rational assessment of the situation. “No one’s ever reversed a black hole, but if the two of us put our heads together, I bet we can,” Shuri explains to the newly arrived Iron Man, making it clear it is teamwork she is after (2019, ch. 5). Shuri picks the guy she deems most suitable for the job on the basis of his intellectual strengths rather than his physical ones. Iron Man comes flying in, clad in his trademark suit of armour. His suit, with its broad chest, bulging abs and biceps, exaggerates masculine physical strength in no uncertain terms. Here, it seems oddly out of place, as it is simply not in demand. Except its capacity to fly, the suit’s other traditional functions, such as enhanced physical strength, padding or inbuilt weapons systems are not used. Shuri’s choice of Iron Man is noteworthy within the superhero genre. Jeffrey A. Brown maintains that



Fig. 4: Okorafor and Romero 2019, ch. 4

superhero films valorise rigid, traditional gender norms and extreme versions of hegemonic masculinity. The masculine ideals superheroes embody and offer as worthy traits to aspire to are “physical strength, resiliency, power, and heterosexual desirability” (2017, ch. 2). These are not the qualities that Shuri values in Iron Man, nor in any man. When Moses Magnum, an African terrorist with seismic powers trying to interfere with their plans, boasts of his physical powers by saying “my quake will shake you both up”, Shuri snorts at his name, saying: “Moses Magnum? What kind of name is that? Trying to be pious and a gangsta.

<sup>3</sup> Kimoyo beads are part of Wakanda’s advanced technology. The beads are made of vibranium and serve, among other things, communicative purposes (via holograms or screens). Shuri often wears them as a bracelet.

With Shuri, Okorafor tells a new story about Africa, offering readers both, an Afrocentric viewpoint and a fresh take on the continent.

Ridiculous” (Okorafor and Romero 2019, ch. 5). Moses continues bragging that, “With the energy I mined from the black hole, your defenses are useless! The world will bow to me!”, Shuri matter of factly deconstructs his line of thinking: “Ruling the planet is gonna be hard when it’s about to be swallowed by a black hole! Wake up, Magnum. Go away and let us work!” (ch. 5). Shuri’s reaction unmasks Moses Magnum’s exaggerated masculinity; with a name evocative of a gun (the Magnum), it is inflated, overtly phallic, destructive and, in its combination with a biblical reference (Moses), absurd if not hypocritical. In terms of ethics too, she reveals his true colours. His motif is power for power’s sake, even at the cost of the world and its inhabitants. Here, Okorafor may be subtly criticising the power-hungry egomaniac rulers of the real world who ruthlessly exploit their country’s natural resources thereby robbing their subjects of their livelihoods. Shuri makes it clear that for her Moses’s kind of destructive hyper-masculinity is no model to adhere to. It has been argued that women can make a difference because dominant conceptions of masculinity depend, among other things, on women that support them. Women’s valorisations influence men’s behaviour. The choices women make, sexually and socially, function as positive reinforcement and thus sustain certain kinds of masculinities while discrediting others (hooks 2008, 131–33; Jewkes and Morrell 2010, 7).

*Shuri* not only rewrites, but in its visuality, redraws both masculinities and femininities. This is of consequence, for as Brown maintains, at the heart of superhero comics lies a gender-aligned “fantasy of identification” if not “the dream of super-masculinization” (2017, ch. 2). Brown shows that superheroes have traditionally presented “a very narrow definition of masculinity”, as well as of femininity. Peppard maintains that “Superhero comics objectify and idealize both male and female bodies. [...] Whereas male superheroes tend to display exaggerated power characteristics, such as muscles, female superheroes tend to display exaggerated sexual characteristics, such as breasts and

buttocks” (2017, 107). Okorafor challenges this single patriarchal story and makes a significant difference. She and the visual artists largely refrain from depicting Shuri and the other female characters in such overtly sexualised ways. Frequently, they highlight Shuri’s wings or her arms which are pronounced by white, arm-length, supportive bandages. Black female stereotypes – or objectifying, controlling images as Patricia Hill Collins calls them – such as the mammy, the matriarch or the sexually aggressive Jezebel are not repeated either (2000, 69–96). The femininities *Shuri* offers are individualised and diverse, ranging from a fearless science genius (Shuri), to fierce warriors (Okoye), book-loving high school graduates (Mansa) and a proactive, wise and traditional Queen Mother Ramonda, to mention but a few. By refraining from stereotypical, objectifying representations and by choosing to have her superheroine prefer brain to muscle, discredit problematic masculinities, and reinforce cooperative, intelligent, gender-equitable masculinity, Okorafor’s comic offers alternative, equitable gender role models.

### Space shuttles and ancestors: Africanfuturism and Africanjuism

With *Shuri*, Okorafor tells a new story about Africa, offering readers both, an Afrocentric viewpoint and a fresh take on the continent. By extensively using African imagery and aesthetics, she is able to zoom in on Africa’s rich culture, history, traditions and future. As such it provides a necessary counter-discourse to reductive, stereotypical representations in the media and in comic books of Africa as a timelessly poverty-ridden continent in crisis, full of people who depend on foreign aid. It is precisely through its combination of text and images, that the comic can contribute “to positive visual representation [...] of Africa and Africans, showing characters who accept their responsibilities in solving problems” as Ute Fendler points out (2018, 92, 94). Jakob F. Dittmar specifies that when we look at “the design of environments/settings (gardens, interiors, transportation) as well as figures (their clothing, hairstyles,



behaviour, body language),” it becomes obvious that the visual content depicted in comics “refers to cultures and their use of symbols all the time” (2020, 30). Even a cursory glance at the first page of the story proper in *Shuri* immediately reveals a setting full of traditional African aestheticism and cultural symbols, that are simultaneously futuristic and high-tech. Technology and science do not replace, but rather complement tradition in Okorafor’s characteristic genre-blend of science fiction with fantasy. This is exemplified in the character of Shuri, a scientist with a special connection to the Djalia, the place of Wakandan memory and to the spirits of her ancestors who dwell there (see fig. 3). The ancestors are frequently present and in touch with Shuri as hovering, silent or speaking spirits in traditional African masks (see fig. 1). Their difference in dimension is visually clearly marked by a monochromatic purple-white colour scheme. Shuri derives strength as well as special powers from the spirit world, so at least parts of her powers are clearly cultural in nature. In her blog, Okorafor describes herself as “an Africanfuturist and an Africanjujuist”. As she defines it, “Africanfuturism is a sub-category of science fiction. Africanjujuism is a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative” (2019). Combining “futurism” with “jujuism” – science with magic and intuitive knowledge – Okorafor links Africa’s past with its future and renders this blend as a source of power and social transformation. She thereby defies constructions of Africa as primitive, backwards and in need of outside help, which have traditionally served as an alibi to colonise / “advance” and control the continent and its people (see for example Anne McClintock 1995, 36–42). Shuri is therefore reminiscent of what Carli Coetzee views as characteristic of Afro-superheroes: Their “Afro-supermodernity” documents agency and offers “connections between future, present and past [that] are complex and inflected with activist potential” (2016, 242).



Fig. 5: Okorafor and Romero 2019, ch. 1

### Groot(boom), locusts and Aretha Franklin: “Respect” the music of Africa’s natural world

Africa’s natural world pervades the comic visually in the form of two major characters of literally gigantic proportions: the baobab tree and the grasshopper. The baobab tree is one of the world’s oldest and largest trees, and a common topos in African literature. In this comic the baobab serves as the site of Shuri’s unacknowledged childhood heroism (and as such a place of memory that connects her with her brother) and as the site of the secret meetings of the women of the Elephant’s Trunk (and as such a (traditionally West-African) social place of communication and debate) (see fig. 1). Moreover, it is the site of Shuri’s astral projections into space. Given its arboreal nature and fitting name of “Grootboom

4 For further details see



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the Second, after the original Grootboom in Namibia, the largest baobab in Africa” (Okorafor and Romero 2019, ch. 2), it leads us (as well as *Shuri*) directly to Groot and Rocket Raccoon, two of Marvel’s Guardians of the Galaxy.<sup>4</sup> In humorous ways the comic verbally and visually conflates Groot and the baobab tree. So, on several levels, the baobab tree in *Shuri* serves as a connector between the past and the present, between people, and to other Marvel texts and characters, as well as to other worlds, such as outer space. The second giant is also the comic’s supervillain, the Space Lubber, a twelve-legged grasshopper of massive scale. Despite the fact that we first encounter it in space, from an African perspective it is immediately evocative of the real referent, the locust. In an African context, the locust is a symbol of mass-destruction. At the time of writing this article, East Africa is battling its worst locust invasion in decades, threatening the food security of an estimated 25 million people (Schacht 2020). To emphasise its threat, Okorafor endows her supervillain with a protective plasma shield and the ability to leave black holes behind itself. Its destructive power reaches far beyond dark matter, threatening to destroy the very soul of Black people. Feeding on energy as it does, the Lubber is particularly fond of the energy of music. In fact, we first encounter the Space Lubber listening to and obviously attracted by the music Groot and Rocket Raccoon play in their spaceship: Aretha Franklin’s Song “Respect”. Okorafor explicitly dedicated this 3rd chapter to “the late, great Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul” and the comic at this point is visually and verbally pervaded by her song, effectively turning outer space into a musical space. Through Franklin’s iconic song, Okorafor establishes a powerful link between Africa and African America and

invokes America’s Black history, Black female empowerment and the civil-rights movement. *Shuri* and Rocket Raccoon eventually manage to send the Lubber away, but it returns in search for more music and strikes at a music festival in Timbuktu, Mali. By setting the events in Timbuktu, a vibrant intellectual and spiritual capital of Africa in the 15th and 16th century, and a present-day UNESCO world heritage site, Okorafor moves Africa’s heritage into the limelight, alluding to its endangerment from religious extremism and desertification. *Shuri*’s adventures with the music-obsessed Space Lubber continue in the sequel, where the Lubber is revealed as an ambassador of the natural world and its lost sounds, thus reminding us about the true supervillains behind the destruction of Africa’s natural world.

### Teaching *Shuri*

While opening up single stories about gender, race and Africa and thus offering unexpected views and multiple points of identification in a diverse, transcultural secondary classroom, *Shuri* also abounds with motivational baits that even resistant readers are likely to take. Its comic form grants visual support and balance to the authentic language, which is colloquial and conversational. Generically, *Shuri* adheres to the template of the highly popular superhero story, and most learners will be acquainted with, if not fans of, the narrative universe of Marvel. Some might have even watched the *Black Panther* film. All of this heightens attraction and eases the burden of processing non-simplified English, which contains lexical items that secondary learners will not yet be familiar with. Given its Africanfuturist and Africanjujuist nature, *Shuri* appeals to those who enjoy both science fiction and fantasy, catering to a broad diversity of interests.

## Shuri and the single story about girls and boys

### Aims

Identify gender stereotypes and their disadvantages.

Highlight the ways in which *Shuri* breaks with gender stereotypes and how this is depicted visually and verbally.

Describe and compare visual scenes.

Write a profile of Shuri.

Apply language to describe people: appearance, body parts, clothes, technical gadgets, colour, shapes, personality.

### Activity 1

Before handing out the comic book, read out or display the following description of the story's protagonist: *"The person is bold/brave, unafraid, self-confident/self-assured, passionate, smart, good at maths, powerful, a scientist, an engineer, fast, reliable, strong. The person has a sense of humour, fights back and saves the world."* Then ask learners whether they think this protagonist is male or female and why. Discuss why we often automatically associate certain characteristics, jobs and abilities with a certain gender. Introduce the term "gender stereotype" and unpack why it is a problem (e.g. is incomplete, limits our choices, likes/dislikes and behaviours, is prescriptive/normative, shows us as one thing only, can actually turn us into one thing only, robs us of dignity, power, etc.). As an optional but eye-opening follow up and transfer to (comic relevant) body language, you could show and discuss the "Always #LikeAGirl" video clip:



### Activity 2

Form groups of five, use the first two pages of the comic and allocate a panel to each group member (fig. 2+3).

Individually, learners take their time to study their panel: the text (pre-teach challenging language) and most importantly the illustration. They then write down what they can see (dominant colour(s), who/what is dominant/foregrounded, who/what is in the background, body parts, body language, facial expressions, costumes, gadgets/weapons (and possibly what they stand for)) and what they find surprising or unusual. Alternatively, learners write down "I spy with my little eye"-statements about their panel to play with their fellow group members in the next phase.

In their groups, learners each present their panel, beginning with the panel of Shuri's childhood and ending with her portrait on the one-page panel. Together, they describe how she develops and grows from panel to panel (from little sister and bystander to forerunner and superheroine of this comic). Based on their findings and based on the description in activity 1, they begin to establish Shuri's profile. Provide a handout that contains rubrics such as: *family, past experience, skills, country of origin, physical appearance, gadgets, personality* and ask learners to identify elements that are stereotypically female/male.

As learners read on, they continue to add details to Shuri's profile.

### Activity 3

At this stage or further into the comic, ask learners to write down what skills, abilities and personality traits they have in common with Shuri and which ones they would like to have. Alternatively, the first part can be done as a compliment activity in pairs.

## Wakanda and the single story about Africa

### Aims

Identify and revise commonly held views about Africa(ns).

Portray a feature of Africa (real or depicted in the comic).

### Activity 1

Before looking at the comic, learners spontaneously list words that come to mind when they hear "Africa". Ask learners to keep their lists.

### Activity 2

During reading, or as a post-reading task, half the learners scan the comic book for traditional African elements, and the other half for futuristic/technological ones. These can be visual or verbal elements. Let learners choose and present to a partner the one element that surprised or fascinated them most.

### Activity 3

Based on activity 2, learners explore and present a topic of their choice in the form of a CLIL project. Possible topics include:

Natural resources/vibranium,<sup>5</sup> Wakandan technology, the science (fiction) behind Shuri (plasma shields, black holes, data transmission via LED light bulbs, etc.), the natural world/baobab trees, Timbuktu, spiritual concepts in *Shuri* (Djalia, dreamtime, astral projection), Aretha Franklin and her music, African fashion and design, the 2018 *Black Panther* film directed by Ryan Coogler, the 2016 Netflix film *Hidden Figures* about female African American mathematicians at NASA directed by Theodore Melfi.

Learners present their findings, in a poster, as part of a class website, as a power point presentation with recorded audio, or as a video tutorial, with follow-up questions for the viewers.

<sup>5</sup> The 2010 documentary *Blood in the Mobile*, might be of interest in the context of natural resources .



### Activity 4

Watch and discuss Adichie's TED talk *The Danger of a Single Story* and ask learners what new stories *Shuri* has told them. Refer back to the lists learners made in activity 1.



### Shuri and Iron Man: It's teamwork

#### Aims

Describe how the problem of reversing the black hole is solved by Shuri and Iron Man.

Reflect on the ability of asking for help and working as a team (across gender/racial divides) in difficult situations as a strength/resource.

Apply the language of speculation to make guesses about Shuri's choice of partner.

#### Activity 1:

At the end of chapter 4 ("An hour later...") Shuri realises she needs help and fast. Stop for a moment and ask your learners to speculate about whom Shuri will call. Encourage the use of structures like: *I think / guess / imagine / maybe she will, she might*, etc. Then ask who they turn to when they realise a problem is too big for them to solve alone.

#### Activity 2

Turn to the last page of chapter 4 ("New York City", see fig. 4) which depicts Shuri's choice of (a speechless) Iron Man and her request. Have half the group put themselves into Shuri's shoes and the other half into Iron Man's and write down their inner monologue either as a script or into empty speech balloons: "... (*thoughts, feelings, worries, hopes, etc.*)". In mixed pairs they then read out their monologues to each other.

#### Activity 3

Learners brainstorm/research Iron Man (personality, suit of armour, gadgets, powers/abilities, language, ethnicity) and pool their findings on the board or digitally in a shared document.

#### Activity 4

Learners individually read about Shuri's and Iron Man's adventure and the final press conference in chapter five. While reading, they should pay special attention to how Shuri and Iron Man work together and choose a colour that in their view best characterises their collaboration. Ask them to write down the reason(s) for their choice. Referring back to their findings in activity 3, learners further highlight the abilities/powers/gadgets that were most useful for Iron Man when solving the problem with Shuri.

#### Activity 5

Round off by having learners report their answers to a partner or to the whole class and by discussing whether asking for help is a sign of weakness or a competence – in light of this comic and in their own view. Shuri's rhetorical question at the press conference "Is the world really ever saved by one person?" could serve as a springboard for a short debate.

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