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# Historian Gerardo Aldana, an expert in Mesoamerican civilizations, consults on “Wakanda Forever,” propelling his research into the MCU — and ending up on screen

In a key, early scene in “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever,” Queen Ramonda takes the floor of the United Nations to assert her country’s resilience and strength despite the death of King T’Challa, and to defend their refusal to share vibranium, a rare and powerful metal, with the rest of the world.

Overseeing the proceedings with a careful — and somehow familiar — gaze is a distinguished gentleman known on screen as, simply, Assembly Chairperson. Off screen and around UC Santa Barbara, that gentleman is known as Gerardo.

That’s Gerardo Aldana, a professor of Chicana/o Studies, who came into the small role by way of a huge one: serving as a consultant on the film, which vibrantly depicts Mayan and Mesoamerican culture.  Of which Aldana is a leading expert.

(Aldana speaks about his research, and his experience working on the project, in an interview with writer Ta-Nehisi Coates for the new podcast, “Wakanda Forever: The Official Black Panther Podcast,” debuting Wednesday, Jan. 18. He will speak on

campus Tuesday, Jan. 24 in the sold-out event, “Wakanda Forever and Indigenous World-Building,” at the Carsey-Wolf Center.)

“I have no idea how they found me,” Aldana recalled, laughing, of the email he received “completely out of the blue” in 2020, asking if he’d be interested in consulting on Maya culture for a movie. Initially nervous and non-committal — that first outreach was scant on details — his worries evaporated quickly.

For two years, from pre-production to premier (and undercover — he signed a nondisclosure agreement when he took the gig), Aldana worked with director Ryan Coogler and his team. Bringing his knowledge of Mesoamerican culture, he helped to refine the script, consulted on character development and informed wardrobe and set design for the filmmakers’ reimagining of Atlantis as Talokan, an underwater civilization descended from ancient Maya.

“They had already set the standard with Wakanda, drawing from African culture and creating something people could grab on to and be emotionally invested in,” Aldana said. “With this new version of Atlantis, Ryan told me he wanted to explore themes that are culturally specific with Indigenous communities — migration, having to uproot, those are huge.

“So it was, ‘Tell me about Mesoamerican religions, tell me about Mesoamerican culture’ — just a massive dump of information at first,” he recounted. “Then we got more strategic: ‘We have this idea – how would it translate into a Mesoamerican space?’ They were very much about deep diving into it and making sure everything makes sense.”

Coogler’s commitment to representing indigeneity — and his dedication to doing so accurately — extended to the film’s producers, art directors, designers, props and wardrobe teams, Aldana said. He met with most of them at some point.

“So much of it was sharing content, which was a rich experience,” he said. “But so much also was how they’re selecting the content and figuring out how to translate it for film, moving academic stuff into a completely different medium. It felt like an incredible collaboration that I have not had in the academy. It was creative, generative, amazing.”

Aldana gets major props himself from Coogler, who spoke of the scholar's impact in press materials for the film.

"We were, thankfully, introduced to Dr. Gerardo Aldana, who's a professor of history and this is his field," Coogler states. "He was an incredible guide for us in terms of turning us onto any kind of knowledge or literature that would be helpful, and in helping to supervise all of our prep phase in terms of the costumes and the production on design and the language. I think there's seven languages spoken in the film, Yucatec Mayan being a major one. He's somebody who has both worked with modern Mayan communities and reads and writes glyphs.

"All these things work themselves into the film, and the more we got into it, the more we realized it was meant to be," continues the director. "These cultures were very closely related and also different in ways that are really cool. I'm forever indebted to Dr. Aldana and the performers of Mayan origin who we worked with. We wanted to recognize that there are so many Mayan communities in Mexico, Central America and here in the U.S., even though they are often times misrepresented as a people that don't exist anymore."

As an academic, Aldana said, seeing his research translated to the silver screen — accurately, and in a massive Marvel blockbuster, no less — was deeply gratifying.

"In being accurate, everything in the film is a portal to learn more about ancient Maya culture, and I couldn't be more grateful that is the approach they ended up taking," he said. "This is a way to inspire new curiosity. There seems to be this movement on social media where folks are saying they're so moved by the representation of Indigenous and Maya people and the language and the artwork. That's powerful. This film is saying 'look at the artistry, the science, the possibilities, the robustness of this culture.'"

Several months into the collaboration, which until then had been facilitated by Zoom, Aldana got some analog facetime with not only Coogler and crew, but with Queen Ramonda herself, when he was invited to film a scene with Angela Bassett.

"When they said, 'Hey, we want to invite you to have a small on-screen appearance,' I thought, 'Oh my god, this is insane,'" he recalled. "But at the same time there is no way I could say no. They flew me to Atlanta, to Tyler Perry Studios, and it was during Covid, so there were lots of protocols. To be on set with Angela Bassett, she is such a powerful presence. I mean, she is an actual queen. The experience was fantastic."

Now about that premier.

This being Wakanda, it was a purple carpet rather than red, and yes, Aldana attended. His plus-one was his daughter, Seri, beside whom he binged every Marvel movie during the pandemic without ever revealing just why he was so keen to view the entire canon.

“I signed that NDA so I never told anyone anything about this, the entire time,” Aldana said. “The first she knew about it was when I took her to the premier in Hollywood, which was so much fun.”

With Hollywood’s award season in full swing and “Wakanda Forever” stockpiling industry accolades — Bassett just won a Golden Globe for her portrayal of Queen Ramonda — it begs the question: If Oscar comes calling, could Aldana attend the ceremony? Would he?

“This is already way more than I could possibly have expected,” he demurred. “I mean, I still don’t know even know how they found me. I’m just very grateful to have been a part of it. This is a special film.”

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