

Black Panther: Cinematic Masterpiece or CIA Recruitment Video?

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Abstract

This article explores the aesthetic and political implications of the representations of the Black Radical Tradition and the CIA in the Marvel Entertainment movie, Black Panther. The article argues that by using the character, Killmonger, to misrepresent the Black Radical Tradition and by portraying the CIA as an ally of Wakanda, Black Panther distorts the history of colonization and resistance in Africa and aids the CIA in its current efforts to recruit agents of color.

Keywords: Afro-futurism, Black Panther, Black Power, CIA, Kwame Nkrumah, Pan-Africanism, Patrice Lumumba.

A little over a month before the release of the movie, Black Panther, a video appeared on YouTube featuring two black men whose excitement about the newly released movie poster was both funny and contagious (“Fans React to Black Panther Poster. YouTube”, 2019). Their response reflected a critique of the racially exclusive, non-diverse history of American cinema.

Man #1: All the time?

Man #2: So, we sitting here looking at this dope-ass Black Panther poster.

Man #1: All the time?

Man #2: And the conclusion that we have come to is that this is what white people get to feel all the time.

Man #1: All the time!

Man #2: Since the beginning of cinema.

Man #1: All the time. This?

Man #2: You get to feel empowered like this and represented.

Man #1: This? This what y’all get to feel like all the time?... I would love this country too.

While I agree with the video’s critique of the overwhelming whiteness of Hollywood cinema, the men’s fawning over the *Black Panther* movie poster (one of them literally tries to embrace it!) makes me wonder whether the non-diverse nature of American filmmaking has generated a craving for representation so uncritical that the mere appearance of black bodies on a movie poster, albeit regally and futuristically attired, is cause

for celebration. There is a danger in this. Symbolic representation and the identification it invites can have troubling political implications, and has often done so in black popular culture. That was certainly true during the Blaxploitation era of the sixties and seventies, a period Michelle Wallace mocked as:

changing the skin color and motivation here and there, of a James Bond movie. It was flashy and attention-attracting like a zoot suit. Black men kicking white men's asses, fucking white women, and stringing black women along in a reappearance of the brutal Buck on the silver screen. Black men in big green hats, high heeled shoes, and mink, with 'five white bitches' around the corner turning tricks for them. (Wallace, 2015, pp.48-49)

However, with Black Panther's positive and varied representations of black women, we have been transported to a cinematic universe far beyond the one Wallace describes. For better or worse, we have entered the Marvel Universe. Through the characters of Okoye, general of the Wakandan military; Shuri, the young genius responsible for Wakanda's technological wizardry; Nakia, the Wakandan Spy, and the all-female Dora Milaje security force, Black Panther embodies a commitment to gender equality reflective of the #BlackGirlMagic and #MeToo moment in which it was made. Meanwhile, Eric Killmonger, the character whose hypermasculine posture represented a political approach at odds with the previous aforementioned perspectives.

If this were all that was happening in the film, Black Panther might deserve the praise that it has received. Unfortunately, the movie has a complex and problematic relationship to black radical politics. Like Jack Kirby and Stan Lee's 1966 comic whose first issue appeared three months before the formation of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, California, Black Panther alludes to the black radical tradition while simultaneously seeking to distance and disambiguate itself from it.¹

The central conflict in the film between T'Challa and Killmonger is over the question of global black liberation. Wakanda has pursued an isolationist route, and although it is both wealthy and technologically advanced, its efforts to conceal its wealth and power from the world have prevented it from doing anything to remedy the oppression of black people in almost every other part of the globe. Killmonger, in a distorted portrayal of Pan-Africanism,² wants to use vibranium, the natural resource upon which Wakanda's technological power is based, to advance a scheme of imperialistic revenge against European and Euro-American colonial powers.

In much of the social media discussion that followed the release of Black Panther, I noticed a strange dynamic: the film's fans would make it sound like the greatest thing since reparations, but, whenever anyone dared criticize the film, they'd invariably complain: "It's just a movie! You're reading way too much into it." French literary critic, Roland Barthes used to talk about the powers and pleasures of the text, implying that we should never be so naïve as to think that a text is not exercising power over us simply because it is pleasurable.⁴ This is as true of Black Panther as it is of any other text. At the risk of "reading too much into" the film, I would argue that Black Panther entertains its audience and offers up answers to important questions such as: how have African Americans been affected by racial oppression? What is the nature of the relationship between Africans and African Americans? What might Africa be if colonialism had never occurred? Should the natural resources of African nations be used to enrich an African elite or shared with the world? What is the responsibility of wealthy Africans, continental and diasporic, to their black sisters and brothers who lack access to technology and capital? What are the best means to achieve global black empowerment? Who are our allies in the struggle for racial justice, and who, our enemies?

The conflict between King T'Challa and Killmonger and the favorable representation of C.I.A. officer and Wakandan ally, Agent Ross, is *Black Panther's* answer to this last question. Killmonger's desire to seek militaristic revenge upon western colonial and neocolonial regimes and to establish a global black empire conflates two questions: is revenge ever justified, and is it possible to unify African and African-descended people globally? The first question is never really presented as a question, but rather a foregone conclusion that makes Killmonger easily readable as the movie's villain. In other words, Killmonger is a villain because he seeks revenge and revenge is never justified. The second question of whether African and African-descended people can be unified globally, rather than being presented as Pan-Africanists once conceived it, *i.e.* as a United States of Africa (similar to the now embattled European Union), is instead distorted into a nightmarish vision of a dictatorial, totalitarian empire with a power-mad Killmonger at the helm. By combining the "questions" of revenge and African unity, the film creates an associational logic that might best be expressed in the nonsensical statement: "African unity is impossible because revenge is never justified."

One could argue that none of this really matters since Pan-Africanism, as a political philosophy and social movement, have little caché in contemporary black politics. By this reasoning, the rejection of Killmonger's vision merely reflects a cultural shift in both Africa and the diaspora from anticolonial resistance to a tacit acceptance of neocolonialism⁵ and neoliberalism⁶ as the only viable alternatives. And, thus, if the film might be criticized for anything, one might most accurately accuse it of beating a dead horse. However, I would argue that, rather than being reflective of a shift within black culture away from radical politics, the film's rejection of Killmonger's vision and embrace of C.I.A. Agent Ross aligns it with cultural forces seeking to produce such a shift.

Admittedly, Agent Ross is no James Bond. Okoye threatens to impale him if he continues to touch King T'Challa, Nakia jokingly refers to him as "colonizer," and M'baku, king of the Jabari tribe, silences him with a Que Dog bark. Rather than playing a stereotypical "white savior," Agent Ross saves Nakia and *is* saved by King T'Challa who naively overrules Okoye's objection to allowing a C.I.A. officer to enter the Kingdom of Wakanda, stating: "I cannot just leave him here knowing that we can save him." On the whole, Agent Ross is portrayed as weak, uncertain, and clueless; at best, a harmless, but good-willed ally of the Wakandan people. Such a figure could hardly be accused of inviting the identification of the film's black viewers. However, identification is not necessarily the point. Like all movies, *Black Panther* wants viewers to identify with its protagonist, King T'Challa, and, perhaps, the Wakandan people as a whole. I'm not arguing that the film romanticizes Agent Ross; I'm arguing that, in portraying him as a likeable ally of the Wakandan people, it invites moviegoers to view him and the C.I.A. in a favorable light.

In a 1979 article titled, "CIA Recruitment for Africa: The Case of Howard University," originally published in the *CovertAction Information Bulletin*, the editors interview a professor of Psychology at Howard University in Washington, DC, who had been contacted by a black C.I.A. officer seeking to recruit her to the agency. The article describes the professor as someone who had written a dissertation on Black Power and Pan-Africanism and been "very active in black organizations since the 60s" (Ray, Schaap, Van Meter & Wolf, 1978, p.86). After quietly listening to the officer's appeal, she calls him "a traitor to African people" (Ray et al., 1978, p.88). She then tracks down the former professor who shared her contact information to demand an explanation (Ray et al., 1978, p.89). He tells her that government agencies approach him all the time seeking "names and information," and that he considers the C.I.A. to be "just another government agency" (Ray et al., 1978, p.89).

Incredulous at his naivete, she tells him that, whether or not he is aware of it, he is “acting as an agent for the C.I.A.” (Ray et al., 1978, p.89). Concerned that the broader black community be alerted to the fact that the C.I.A. is recruiting at the nation’s most prestigious historically black college, she arranges for an interview to air on the evening news at Howard University’s radio station, WHUR (Ray et al., 1978, p.88). The recorded interview, however, mysteriously disappears before it can be aired (Ray et al., 1978, p.89). Finally, this Howard University professor approaches the executive committee at the Association of Black Psychologists and gets them to cancel the booth that the recruiter reserved at their annual convention in order to impede his efforts to recruit black faculty and students (Ray et al., 1978, pp.90-91).

Why did this academic and activist go to such lengths to impede the recruitment efforts of the C.I.A.? Was she paranoid, or was there some danger to faculty, students, and the broader black community? In a series of articles published in the *New York Times* around the time of this event, investigative journalist, Seymour Hersh, reported that the C.I.A. had violated its charter by engaging in a “a massive, illegal domestic intelligence operation. Known as MHCHAOS, the operation maintained 10,000 files on American citizens involved in the Black Power and Anti-Vietnam War movement. As a part of this operation, agents engaged in break-ins, wiretapping, and illegal mail inspections. They also recruited black American agents to inform on the Black Panther Party in the U.S. and abroad (Hersh, 1974). Hersh also reported on C.I.A. involvement in the 1966 coup against Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, whose close relations with the Soviet Union and China were a sore spot for the U.S. According to Hersh, not only did the C.I.A. “advise and support” the military officers who staged the coup, they also conceived a plot to have white agents, in blackface, attack the Chinese embassy in Ghana, kill everyone inside, retrieve as much information as possible, and detonate explosives that would destroy the embassy building. The agency ultimately decided against this operation, but had its field agents maintain such close relations with Anti-Nkrumah military officers that when an uprising took place, C.I.A. headquarters unofficially credited its Accra Station with the coup’s success (Hersh, 1978).

Hersh’s reporting in the *Times* led to the formation of a Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, also known as the Church Committee. Among its many revelations, one of the most shocking was its claim:

The Committee has received solid evidence of a plot to assassinate Patrice Lumumba. Strong hostility to Lumumba, voiced at the very highest levels of government may have been intended to initiate an assassination operation; at the least it engendered such an operation. The evidence indicates that it is likely that President Eisenhower’s expression of strong concern about Lumumba at a meeting of the National Security Council on August 18, 1960, was taken by Allen Dulles as authority to assassinate Lumumba. (“Assassination Archive and Research Center”, 2019)

At the time, Dulles was the Director of Central Intelligence. Patrice Lumumba was the first Prime Minister of independent Congo. While ultimately, the blame for Lumumba’s death must be laid at the feet of the Belgian government,⁷ the Church report revealed that the C.I.A. had plotted to assassinate the African leader even earlier.⁸

In 2013, former C.I.A. Director, John Brennan commissioned Vernon Jordan, president of the National Urban League, to undertake a study of the lack of diversity within the C.I.A. The 48-page

report, titled, “Director’s Diversity in Leadership Study: Overcoming Barriers to Advancement” was critical of the agency’s shortcomings in this area, and made a series of recommendations about how they might improve their recruitment efforts. In response to the report, Johnny C. Taylor, president and CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund vowed that the nation’s 47 publicly-supported Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), in partnership with the C.I.A., will serve as a “pipeline” for the Agency.

In Taylor’s words:

What the Thurgood Marshall College Fund is saying is there are really talented students at institutions other than Harvard, Yale and the (military) academies. There is Howard, Fort Valley State, Florida A&M University – schools that you never thought about are chocked full of talent... How we’re going to help the C.I.A. with this national issue is we’re going to provide them with access to these students. (“CIA Turns To HBCUs To Help Diversify Agency | Thurgood Marshall College Fund”, 2019)

Clearly, we have turned a corner. While the Howard University Psychology professor interviewed in 1979 embodied the recent cultural memory of the Black Power era, a period in which the C.I.A., because of its support for oppressive, neocolonial regimes across the globe, were *personae non grata* in black public space, the C.I.A. now recruits black youth openly and with little opposition from within the black community.⁹

Some may believe that by accusing the movie *Black Panther* of having aligned itself with cultural forces seeking to produce a shift from resistance to U.S. imperialism (*e.g.* the Howard University Psychology Professor) to enthusiastic support for C.I.A. recruitment (*e.g.* the National Urban League and Thurgood Marshall College Fund), I am placing too heavy a burden at the feet of a lighthearted piece of entertainment. After all, is there any evidence the C.I.A. has attempted to use its favorable presence in the movie to advance its interests? Well, actually there is. As part of their #ReelvsRealCIA series, the C.I.A. posted an article on their News & Information blog, titled, “Wakandan Technology Today: A CIA Scientist Explores the Possibilities.” Drawing on the expertise of a C.I.A. scientist, appropriately codenamed “Rebecca” (*i.e.* Becky), the article speculates on the real-life viability of Vibranium, Wakandan sand tables, Kimoyo Beads, the Panther Habit, virtual cars, invisibility cloaks, and Lesotho blanket light shields. The article is informative, well-researched, and chock full of fascinating glimpses into present and future technology (“Wakandan Technology Today: A CIA Scientist Explores the Possibilities - Central Intelligence Agency”, 2019). The “C.I.A. Vision, Mission, Ethos, and Challenges” page of the www.cia.gov website describes the agency’s mission as being to “Preempt threats and further US national security objectives by collecting intelligence that matters, producing objective all-source analysis, conducting effective covert action as directed by the President, and safeguarding the secrets that help keep our Nation safe” (“CIA Vision, Mission, Ethos & Challenges - Central Intelligence Agency”, 2019). So, how is it that they have a paid staff member writing a speculative article on Wakandan technology? The answer can be found a little lower on the same webpage. According to the C.I.A., one of its key challenges is to “Improve the ways we attract, develop, and retain talent to maximize each C.I.A. officer’s potential to contribute to achieving mission” (“CIA Vision, Mission, Ethos & Challenges - Central Intelligence Agency”, 2019). In sum, the Wakandan technology article, in all likelihood, was intended as a recruitment tool for the movie’s mostly young and disproportionately POC audience. This is not to say that Ryan Coogler is self-consciously helping the C.I.A. recruit black and brown youth for the C.I.A., but that the C.I.A. conveniently hung its hat on the modest hook *Black Panther* provides.

Part of what Afrofuturism represents is the wish for a decolonized future. Wakanda, an African nation that has never been colonized, embodies that wish. Eric Killmonger, however distorted a figure, is a reminder that that wish cannot be fulfilled by ignoring the real-world effects of the

racism and colonialism with us today. Afro-futurism may also represent a fatigue among a new generation of black artists and intellectuals with the backward-facing, historical gaze of their nationalist and Pan-African forbears. It's as if the Afrofuturist is saying, "The Sankofa bird looks back, but it looks forward too!" To have one's gaze focused on the historical past at a time when advances in emerging technology are poised to remake the world as we know it is not only myopic; it's downright boring and unimaginative. If Gil Scott-Herron could complain about the differing temporalities upon which black and white existence appeared to be playing out in his 1970 classic, "Whitey on the Moon," how much more oppressive must those divergent temporalities feel to black artists and intellectuals working today? The solution, however, cannot be to simply switch tracks, ignoring the past in favor of the Afrotopic future (The Sankofa bird looks forward, but it looks back too!) Afro-futurists often use the adjective "Pan-African" without acknowledging the history and ideas of the actual, historic movement *for* Pan-Africanism. The danger of such simultaneous invocation and forgetting is that in all of its *au moment* fashionableness, Afro-futurism could wind up neglecting the hard-won wisdom acquired in the struggle against white supremacy and Euro-American imperialism; in this case, allowing agents of that imperialism, like the C.I.A., to refashion their image in the gaps of our collective memory. As burdensome as it may feel, we have to look to both the past and the future to find the answers to questions raised by films like *Black Panther*. Otherwise, instead of boldly projecting what critic Larry Neal once referred to as "Visions of a Liberated Future,"¹⁰ we'll merely find ourselves retracing the same colonized history all over again.

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Notes

1. For information on the Black Radical Tradition, see Robinson and Kelley (2000), and Johnson and Lubin (2017).
2. Accurate understandings of the history of the Pan-African movement can be gleaned from Adi (2018) Esedebe (1994).
3. See Dawson (2003) for an excellent overview of black American political traditions.
4. See Barthes (1975).
5. The classic formulation of neocolonialism can be found in Nkrumah (1971).
6. For an excellent resource on neoliberalism, see Springer, Birch, and MacLeavy (2016).
7. See Witte (2003).
8. For those tempted to believe that the CIA's anti-black activities ended as a result of the revelations brought about through the Church Committee, see Webb (2014) and Levin (2015). For those tempted to believe that the CIA has conducted itself in an ethical manner since the end of the Cold War, see McCoy (2006) and "Report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence" (2014).
9. For more on the C.I.A.'s active efforts to recruit youth of color, see Maya Rhodan "The CIA's Latest Mission: Improving Diversity." *Time*. April 20, 2015. <http://time.com/3826472/cia-diversity/>. Accessed: 14 Jan 2019 and Greg Myre "CIA Recruiting: The Rare Topic the Spy Agency Likes to Talk About." *NPR*. March 26, 2018. 4.44AM ET. Heard on Morning Edition. <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/03/26/594909193/cia-recruiting-the-rare-topic-the-spy-agency-likes-to-talk-about>. Accessed: 14 Jan 2019.

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