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Article

Dialectical Contradictions and African Futures in Coogler's *Black Panther*: An Afrofuturist Analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines how Ryan Coogler's Black Panther contributes to Afrofuturist discourse and African cultural futures by engaging with dialectical materialism and the Igbo philosophy of complementary duality. While prior analyses highlight interculturality and technological advancement in Wakanda, this study focuses on the creative harmonization of tribal and intercultural contradictions as necessary conditions for Africa's future progress. Drawing on theoretical insights from Lenin and Igbo cosmology, the analysis shows how the film reframes conflict as a generative force and reimagines Black identity and sovereignty in a postcolonial and speculative context. The article suggests that Black Panther offers a powerful cultural artefact for envisioning alternative futures beyond neocolonial constraint.

Keywords

Afrofuturism, Dialectical Materialism, Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*; speculative/Science fiction; African-futurism

Introduction

The question of the role of African speculative fiction in the recreation of Black African cultural progress has been of concern to many African scholars, artists, and writers. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe (1988) argues that a new historical form of discourse has emerged from the colonial experience, which impinges on our comprehension of the African world - if only for a "brief moment" (p. 5). These discourses have, to a large extent, provided significant inspiration to Black African resistance leaders during the colonial period (Guthrie 2019, p. 16). The success of the resistance struggles, which also drew from the heroic contributions of the masses, reached superhuman dimensions as their stories were reified into a form of mythic power that continues to frame discussions and understanding of African resistance today. During that period, there was a "mythic appetite" for African heroes and heroines who sought to avoid victimisation, in contrast to Hollywood's typical obsession with Black degradation and abjectness (Guthrie 2015, p. 23). This paper examines the Afrofuturist reconstruction of the ethics of dialectical materialism and complementary duality in Coogler's Black Panther as a basis for negotiating the place of African speculative fiction in the recreation of Black African resistance and cultural progress.

Indeed, the envisioning of a Black world that exists outside of the colonial obsession is precisely what is anticipated in African speculative fiction in which Blackness is exalted as a "superhuman trait that leverages within national and international imaginations" (Anderson, 2016: 233). More so, the discourse of Blackness has now moved from the "grammar of suffering" (Wilderson, 2010, p. 4) to speculative fictional engagements that articulate new possibilities for Africans. Ryan Coogler contributes to this debate by positioning his 2018 award-winning film *Black Panther* as an icon of black African liberation. In it, he deploys a utopian Wakanda nation as a symbolic framework for cultural change from "the primitive African to the technologically and scientifically advanced African" who can "shape their future through their imagination" (Womack, 2015, p. 2). He reveals what the film means to him:

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> For me, it was about this question (of) "What does it mean to be African?" It was a question I couldn't answer. When I was taking this project, it was a question I needed to answer about myself, you know, which is the personal connection that I'm talking about. It's a question that sounds specific, but it's actually universal for a lot of reasons. ... I mean if you ask yourself, "Now what does it mean to be Ukrainian?" or "What does it mean to be Eurasian?" it's a deep question, right, if you think about it. It's not a question you can answer with one word. But it's a question you can spend your life trying to figure out (David Greene, "Interview with Ryan Coogler, February 15, 2018).

Coogler also indicates that the film provides him with a platform to display the African mode of "myth-making." This argument is significant as the question of African cultural identity is linked to the broader issue of what Africa must do to attain its cultural progress. It is revealing that Wakanda is a nation of contradictions, finding itself in a moment of transition in which "time and space are crossing to produce complex figures of difference and identity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). The word "Wakanda" has been used variously as the name of the god of Native Americans, as "a future nation of joy and peace with courageous warriors," and as "the country of life" (Manseau, 2018, p. 1). In its appearance in Coogler's film, it is employed as a framework to negotiate Africa's cultural revolution.

Although many critics have offered some readings of *Black Panther* from diverse perspectives, much of which attempts to foreground the triumph of interculturality over cultural isolationism as its central argument, this paper posits that the film deploys the notion of the unity of opposites to demonstrate that the opposing drives of intercultural dialogue and cultural self-preservation could be harmonized to achieve cultural progress, a fundamental perspective that has been overlooked in available scholarship on the film. For instance, Albert Tallapessyet al (2020, p. 75) offer a multimodal reading of the film that relies on Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory. They contend that although Wakandans are depicted as technologically advanced Africans who are rich and powerful, they are influenced ideologically and culturally by white supremacy. More so, they insist that the film's African characters struggle to negotiate their voices amid cultural differences against the superior. Similarly, Womack also notes that as an icon of black African liberation, the film also draws attention to the vision of cultural change from "the primitive African to the technologically and scientifically advanced African" who can "shape their own future through their imagination" (Womack, 2015, p. 2).

Unfortunately, the preceding argument reveals but does not address the fact that the two opposites - "primitive African" and "technologically advanced African" - are interdependent and need each other. For example, Killmonger's contradictory "feeling of love and hatred" towards the colonizer is depicted simultaneously as ambivalence (Ghaffarpour, 2013, p. 91). When Okoye tells Killmonger, "You are so full of hatred, you will never be a true king," and says to Riri, "You have two choices: you can come to Wakanda conscious or unconscious", Okoye recognizes the fact that in the utopian Wakanda, the presence of life announces the absence of death. Delice Williams (2018, p.28) notes that Coogler's vision of an alternative future is "a fantasy about the erasure (or rather the ingenious evasion) of the very history that produced Blackness as we understand it, particularly in the United States". Thus, the film's vision of tribal self-division can be situated within the framework of opposites coexisting, given that despite its vast resources and technical capabilities, Wakanda must harmonise the disparate voices within its community if it is to protect its resources and achieve cultural progress.

It has also been noted that *Black Panther* offers itself as a counter-infrastructure not just for unifying the complex history of Africa but also for enacting its grand future. Drawing attention to the historical disruption wrought within the African soul by colonial entanglement, Gathara (2018, np) suggests that the film should not be mistaken for just an attempt at liberating Africa from Europe but rather as a 'redemptive counter-mythology' that entrenches the tropes that have been used to dehumanize Africans for centuries. Again, Godfried Asante and Gloria Pindi note that the success of *Black Panther* does not lie only in economic value, but also in its ability to present universal concerns of power, pride, and humanity from global Black perspectives, However, for these scholars, the movie misrepresents itself as a vehicle for unifying complex histories of continental Africans and African diasporic perspectives on Blackness, home, and belonging:

> *Black Panther*'s Afrofuturist unifying and codifying theme of Blackness, as transnationally shared intimate relations, while transformative, yields too much to Western neocolonial and cinematic fantasies about "Africa. … While *Black Panther* is a welcome shift from the dominant white Western gaze; it also

> deserves a critical reading as an ongoing and imperfect project of emancipation from the dominant gaze. (2020, p. 220)

Even if it does not unify the complex histories that connect all Africans, the film, nonetheless, is envisioned to articulate what it means to be black African in both America and Africa" (Smith 2020, p. 1). In a peculiar way, it grapples head-on with the issues affecting modern-day black life rather than dodge complicated themes about race and identity:

> We are in the midst of a regressive cultural and political movement fueled in part by the white-nativist movement, the very existence of *Black Panther* feels like resistance. Its themes challenge institutional bias, its characters take unsubtle digs at oppressors, and its narrative includes prismatic perspectives on black life and tradition. While *Black Panther* is not the first film to discuss these important issues, it is without a doubt, the most high-profile movie in years to discuss these long-overdue problems (Smith, 2020, p. 2).

It has also been argued that the general lack of black Africans in visions of the future makes African viewers of white-centric media believe that they are "erased from the past, erased from the future, hovering in the here and now and waiting for someone to write a story with their complexion in it" (Womack 2015, p. 2). This way, Afrofuturist works such as *Black Panther* intervene by offering a platform for Africans to articulate their vision of their future.

From an economic perspective, *Black Panther* serves as a frame for countering the plethora of harmful anti-African socio-economic policies that are implicitly and explicitly projected through Hollywood. But it also offers a template of the strategies Africa must adopt if it is to realise its dreams of the future. In his reading of the "(limited) scope and scale of popular geopolitics as resistance", Robert Saunders (2019, 139) emphasizes how cultural producers, as well as scholars, critics and prosumers, might reframe and reinterpret “geopolitics via progressive pop culture". In relation to this, he posits that *Black Panther* interrogates 'Hollywood's' appropriation of human suffering for financial profit' through its promotion of neoliberal agenda, orientalism, and othering. This perspective differs, however, from Hanchey's, who notes that *Black Panther* focuses on the transformative and out-of-the-box ideas which Africa must have if it must forge ahead into its glorious future. She argues that the film attempts to change the narrative about international aid which "often functions as a neocolonial extension of colonial power structures" (Hanchey, 2016, p. 11). For her, Aid to Africa is particularly problematic because ideologies that seek to cast the continent as backward and devoid of agency have material consequences for African lives.

Thus, Black Panther’s Afrofuturist thinking is that racist and Western-centric ideologies currently plaguing the continent, such as the politics of aid, can be challenged and dismantled in our understanding of futurity. Thus, in its attempt to extend the frontiers of these perspectives, this paper examines how the film foregrounds the necessity for the harmonization of tribal and intercultural contradictions as a condition for prosperous Afrofutures. Relying on Lenin's (1958, p. 249) concept of "dialectical materialism" and the Igbo concept of "complementary duality" (Suzanne Scafes, 2000, p. 1) as its theoretical strategies, and building on the extant scholarship on "Afrofuturism" (Dery, 1993, p. 29), it examines the movie's marriage of the opposing drives of both intercultural dialogue and cultural isolationism for Africa's cultural progress. The paper observes that although keeping the imaginary Wakandan nation away from the rest of the world helps to protect and deploy its advanced technology solely for its progress, a prosperous Wakandan future is more realizable through intercultural communication. While rethinking the cultural productions of disparate knowledges and techno-cultural imaginaries in *Black Panther,* it suggests that conflicts in the film should be apprehended as precisely the challenges of Africa in the process of self-recreation.

Dual consciousness and Speculative Imagination

Dialectical materialism centres on the belief that everything which exists is material and that this material exists in conflict with something else. Following Hegel's thesis, every phenomenon has its process of development, universally produced by a conflict of contradictions, the negation of the old and the creation of the new (Adoratsky, 1934, p. 15). This is how development occurs. It is a concept that recognises the division of unity into mutually exclusive opposites and their reciprocal relation. Lenin (1958, p. 249) draws on Hegel's argument on the ultimate

"presence of contradiction in the very essence of objects" to argue that there are two historically observable conceptions of development – the metaphysical world outlook which views development as decrease and increase, and the world of duality which views development as a unity of opposites".

In his notion of the union of opposites, Lenin argues that the co-existence of opposites in the world teaches us to distinguish the self-conflicting essence of reality and to understand their significance. If the metaphysical world outlook sees things as static and eternally isolated from one another, the dialectical worldview sees development as arising from the contradictoriness in the essence of things, and this contradictoriness is the fundamental cause of its development. In this sense, 'motion' and 'life' are each a contradiction (Mao, 1937, p. 1) which constantly originates and resolves itself; and as soon as this conflict ceases, life, too, comes to an end, and death steps in (Engels, 1959, p. 166). This points to the continual conflict in human life (Yeats, 1961, p. 467) and to how the community pushes its development forward to solve its problems. But for the metaphysical worldview, a thing must keep on repeating itself as the same kind and cannot change into anything else, and the exploitation that is found in primitive society is what must exist forever unchanged.

Lenin's dual conscious worldview relates to the Igbo concept of complementary duality, especially in the latter's recognition of the inevitable conflicts or endless interactions of the "male and female principles" that are at the heart of human existence (Ngwaba 1996, p. 368). In their view of the world, the Igbo believe that nothing in this world can stand alone. At the core of their cosmology is the principle of duality and difference as a necessary condition of existence. This principle, which is expressed in the Igbo proverb, "ihe kwuru, ihe ozo akwudobe ya" (where something stands, something else will stand beside it), is central to Chinua Achebe's writings, to which he returns again and again. The world of the Igbo is "a world of dualities" (Scafes 2000, p. 1). Bravery and cowardice are interconnected, and neither can exist without the other. The central theses of both the Igbo philosophies can be located in what Lenin describes as the union of opposites. It is based on these theoretical strategies that this article seeks to rethink the ontological contradictions surrounding the struggles in Coogler's Afrofuturist film, *Black Panther*.

Black Panther belongs to the genre that is loosely called “speculative fiction,” a term used to describe a diverse range of genres such as fantasy, horror, utopian fiction, futuristic fiction, alternate histories, and other forms of literature that utilize non-realist narrative strategies. Often used in connection with science fiction, it is a genre that seeks to resolve the problems of origins and classification. The term science fiction entered critical academic discourse in the 1940s. We first had a glimpse of it in the American inter-war "pulp fiction" magazines in which the publisher Hugo Gernsbeck coined the word "scientifiction" in 1926; its reviewed version "Science fiction" later emerged (Jameson, 1979, p. 130). Atwood further indicates that speculative fiction tends towards "utopian" or "dystopian" science fiction (Atwood 2011, p. 4). Given that "utopia," a term coined by Thomas Moore in 1516, is a much older genre than science fiction, many scholars see science fiction as a continuation of the utopian/dystopian tradition (Suvin, 1979, p. 5). Darko Suvin acknowledges this when he argues that science fiction had retrospectively "englobed" utopia, and transformed it into the socio-political subgenre of science fiction.

On the other hand, Afrofuturism has become a vibrant genre that encompasses speculative writings and culture within continental Africa and Diasporan Africa. But after its coinage in 1993 by the writer Mark Dery, a counter-movement known as "Astrofuturism" later emerged in 2003 to challenge its claims. Astrofuturism as a movement holds that "certain works inspired by the technological and engineering advances of the 1950s posit space as a utopian frontier of imperialist expansion that provides possibilities for bettering the problematic race and gender-based social relations plaguing contemporary society" (Guthrie, 2015, p. 23). The term connects to Anderson and Jones' (2015, p. 1) idea of "*Astroblackness,"* which represents a transition from Afrofuturism and its exotic vision about African future. Yet, Brookes (2018, p. 101) also coined what he calls "Afrofuturetypes", which act as a basis for critiquing images of the future circulating as science fiction capital in popular culture. Afrofuturetypes, for him, emphasize black futures in process and on the horizon in the near to long-term futures. Some good examples of Afrofuturetypes are the "Black spirituals and musical performances that have envisioned the past, present and future, in an attempt to transform ghettoised dystopic spaces into domains of survival, redemption and openings for imagined futures" (Brookes, Anderson & Taylor, 2019, p. 2).

In addition to the above subgenres, Nnedi Okorafor coined what she calls "Africanfuturism" (John, 2018, np). Identifying herself as an Africanfuturist, she notes that, while Afrofuturism emphasises African-American

experience, Africanfuturism focuses on mystical elements that derive from actual African cultural beliefs and world views. For her, this is an important distinction that marks her work out. However, as a cultural blueprint that offers an intersectional way of looking at possible futures or alternate realities through a black African cultural lens, Afrofuturism engages the African imagination in reconsidering how Africans engage, such as the old and the new, past and future, identity and liberation.

Unity of Opposites in Wakanda

In its futurist reimagination, *Black Panther* engages the trope of communion of opposites to demonstrate that the greatness of Africa of the future will be indebted to the creative exploitation of the contradictions between races, between technology and culture, between tribes, and most importantly, between the old and the new. To be sure, a key aspect of the cultural impact of the film is discernible in its abilit*y* to show that, rather than negative, conflicts are elements that help to bring out diverse perspectives, which, when harmonized, could lead to positive outcomes. The history of Wakanda, which Young Killmonger learns from his father N'Jobu helps us to understand that conflict is inscribed in the history of man. But more importantly, rather than striving to eliminate conflicts, man should seek how to exploit them for his progress:

> Young Killmonger: Baba...
>
> N'Jobu: Yes, my son.
>
> Young Killmonger: Tell me a story.
>
> N'Jobu: Which one?
>
> Young Killmonger: The story of home.
>
> N'Jobu: Millions of years ago, a meteorite made of vibranium, the strongest substance in the universe, struck the continent of Africa, affecting the plant life around it. And when the time of man came, five tribes settled on it and called it Wakanda. The tribes lived in constant war against each other until a warrior shaman received a vision from the Panther Goddess Bast, who led him to the Heart-Shaped Herb, a plant that granted him superhuman strength, speed and instincts. The warrior became king and the first Black Panther, the protector of Wakanda. Four tribes agreed to live under the king's rule, but the Jabari Tribe isolated itself in the mountains.

As Wakanda thrived on its advanced technology enhanced by vibranium, they vowed to hide the truth of their power from the outside world. Young Killmonger is alarmed to hear this: "And we still hide, Baba?" N'Jobu affirms it: "Yes." Then Young Killmonger raised the important question: "Why?" Dissatisfied with this isolationist idea, he accuses his ancestors and passes judgment on them: "You were wrong - all of you were wrong - to turn your backs on the rest of the world! We let the fear of discovery stop us from doing what is right..."

As we see in the film, although Wakanda is a technologically advanced nation fuelled by the metal vibranium (the science), Black Panther's physical strength comes from the African-centered "magic" that Ramonda performs (Allen, 2018, p. 22), a powerful illustration that magic and science may be exploited as opposites that complement each other. *Black Panther* draws ostensibly from the harmony to denounce the notion that a thing must forever maintain its primordial identity, that a people must remain static without a push towards higher reality. Thus, in the film, the union between magic and science, culture and technology, continental Africa and Diasporan Africa, and cultural isolationism and interculturality, could be located within the structural frame of unity.

The philosophical notion of dialectical harmony is perceptible in the film's mode of characterization. The central character in the film is given an alter-ego with whom he shares some divergent views of how things ought to be. However, behind these divergences is a type of complementarity (what the Igbo call "Oke Olu and Nne Olu – male tune and female tune in music) that blends and harmonizes into one smooth cantata (Ngwaba 1996, p. 368). This is

the Du-Boisian double consciousness (1903) in the film that seems to be reinforced in the African and Afro-American dichotomies viewed through the conflict between T'Challa and Killmonger. The struggle between both characters represents the collision of "what it means to be African" and "what Africa means to Afro-minorities today" (Gonzalez, 2018, p. 3).

Symbolically, Wakanda represents Africa without Western colonialism, and Killmonger shows us that we can sometimes inevitably become what we seek to destroy. For Gonzalez, Killmonger wants to use Wakanda's resources to become a colonizer of the West while Wakanda's conservative ways created the very problem that sought to destroy them" (2018, p. 290). And because *Black Panther* depends upon a legible Blackness, it must draw upon historiographies of the "real world", while depicting a global Blackness that is at once an "invention" (Cobb, 2018, np). Even beyond the reinvention of a new Africa, global Blackness in Wakanda is a cultural realm in which consciousness and innovation are promoted in a productive, speculative space. Guthrie (2015) again observes:

> Coogler's achievement is to coalesce elements that already exist - and elevate them as part of superpower mythology. It is an imaginative "invention" that exceeds the Africa we know today and reifies connections already shared between Blacks on the continent and in America. Both T'Challa and Erik valorise Black humanity and celebrate Black artefacts, masks, robes, weapons, and language that are part of a global Black legacy (p. 24)

Significantly, the film deploys characters whose imaginative dreams foreground a libidinal economy of race and Blackness that is lucrative and rewarding" (Sexton 2010, p. 32) in depicting Wakanda as rich in human resources, which can power progress. So does the presence and optimal utilization of techno-cultural elements in the film demonstrate the nation's ability to forge the future of its dream (Guthrie 2015, p. 24). Yet, as Hanchey argues, "although *Black Panther* challenges some neocolonial assumptions by staging an African country that is developed in ways that break Western norms, it reproduces and even strengthens other aspects of coloniality by portraying Wakanda as an exceptional African nation, equating economic development with morality, and reinforcing the idea of aid as a universal good" (Hanchey, 2016, p. 12). But while Wakanda's advanced technology could benefit the rest of the world, Wakanda equally would require what others have to achieve socio-economic and technocultural sufficiency.

The film also blends fascinating ideals and repulsive experiences through its invocation of both oppression and agency in the constant quest to resolve the conflicts between blood cousins on both sides of the battle. Unfortunately, the cure for the malady confronting the Black African Diasporans is to be found neither in T'Challa's isolationist ethics alone nor merely in Killmonger's globalizing ideation but in creatively utilizing the best elements of the two. T'Challa could have validated himself as a good person by understanding how Killmonger was affected by American racism and T'Challa's "cruelty", and could have agreed that justice sometimes requires violence as a last resort against oppression (Lebron, 2018, p. 1). Yet, in a way, Killmonger's attempts to take over several of the world's major cities portrays him as an imperialist rather than African liberator. Specifically, his desire to conquer China was purely for the sake of power. The film seems to declare that although imperial violence is a colonizer's tool, it is also a tool of black African liberation; a way of saying that the master's tools can "dismantle the master's house" (Serwer, 2018, p. 31).

Black Panther, while representing contradictions and dichotomies, offers a compelling framework for interrogating how continental and Diasporan Africans can imaginatively coalesce culture and technology for global self-redemption. It thus uses technology to project future worlds in which machines and humans settle social inequities and dangerous rifts between races, genders, and hierarchical worlds. Within Wakanda, such aspects of technoculture as flying vehicles, vibranium-powered railways, magnificent markets, and heroic Black African women leaders act as "social actants" (Eshun, 2003, p. 291) that promise solutions to some communal needs, which in turn reduce various levels of rifts. They serve people in the community irrespective of their status. Given that they could only reduce, not eliminate, communal rifts, tribal schisms still exist side by side with these superhuman technologies and achievements. For instance, M'baku, who belongs to the dissenting Jabari tribe, interrogates the value of royal lineage, unquestioned leadership and ancestral worship. And it is through the ritual battle to the death that T'Challa would claim his place as the "rightful heir" to the throne. He tells us how the conflicts would be recreated to forge solidarity:

> Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot. We must not. We will work to be an example of how we, as brothers and sisters on this earth, should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe.

For him, those who are wise always build bridges in times of crisis. Notwithstanding his consumption of the herb potion from Wakandan priests, the conflict before him aims to teach that true powers emerge after all human frailties are overcome. It is proof that profound joy often emerges from the throes of the human struggle for freedom, a trope that adorns many African worldviews.

The trope of death and resurrection in the film is a duplicity that points to the union of opposites and reinforces T'Challa's worthiness for the task he is crafted to undertake. In the third battle, he kills Killmonger with the latter's weapon to achieve his final triumph, thus demonstrating that his strength comes not solely from vibranium, not from the herb potion, and not from his technologically enhanced panther suit, but from his battle training. His defeat of Killmonger with the latter's spear illuminates the idea that that which protects could also harm. As cousins, their struggle both brings Killmonger to utter delusion as well as charts the course to freedom for him. If the latter's death and the absence of a clear burial for him indicate the possibility of a return, his death is necessary as a radical repudiation of bondage.

Again, T'Challa's vision is furthered by Shuri, an outstanding female character whose legendary bravery enables her to invent vibranium products and efficient war instruments for the defence of her society. Interestingly, she blends her ingenuity with the raw power of violent resistance for the reunification of tribal affiliation. The "if you can see it, you can be it" philosophy applied to the female characters in the film represents Wakandan women as "the very definition of 'Black Girl Magic' that celebrates the resilience of Black women'" (Allen, 2018, p. 21). Shuri's creative deployment of both violent and reunifying ethics would lead to T'Challa's triumph over Killmonger who "cannot see beyond his rage" (Serwer 2018, p. 31), and the dissenting tribe.

Nakia, T'Challa's girlfriend, is a strong female member of Wakanda's "War Dogs" whose liberal perspectives on Wakanda's role in the world make her the moral centre of the film. In her superhero vigilantism, she argues that Wakanda could do more good in the world by opening itself up to the outside world and bringing help to those who are desperately in need of it. To be sure, she advocates a peaceful approach over Killmonger's radical approach, and this distinguishes her from other Black Panthers who came before her. In their conversation, T'Challa tells Nakia that her stubborn attitude to life would prevent her from becoming a great queen. But Nakia argues that rather than a constraint, her stubbornness would enhance the prospects of her becoming a great queen:

> T'Challa: If you weren't so stubborn, you would make a great queen.
>
> Nakia: I would make a great queen because I am so stubborn.
>
> Nakia's assumption is that stubbornness and greatness are complementary rather than opposing elements.

It is to be noted that the tribal sentiments in Wakanda, comparable to the tribal conflicts among ethnic configurations in Nigeria, between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, or between Xhosa and Zulu in South Africa, or between Luo and Kikuyu in Kenya, show that internal conflict is endemic, yet may catalyse African continental and diasporic collaboration. Wakandans privilege a collective self-definition that is anchored on their idea of "nation, tribal alliance, and geography" (Williams, 2018, p. 28). But these are concepts that are each full of contradictions, without which societies may remain static and unable to overcome new challenges. As Sardar observes, clashes may be paradoxical, but they perform a very useful function by offering us a perspective that prevents an oversimplified analysis of problems and situations. As a result, "we are forced to consider clashing trends, viewpoints, facts, hypotheses and theories and realize that the world is not amenable to naïve one-dimensional solutions" (Sardar 2009, p. 2).

Diverse elements deployed in the film compel us to rethink existing stories about Blackness, embodied

knowledge, and shared historical, political, and cultural heritages in new, transformative ways. As Anderson notes, African speculative fiction celebrates Africans who are propelled by new thoughts and creative energy to enter into "creative dialogue with the boundary of space-time, the exterior of the macro-cosmos and the interior of the micro-cosmos" (Anderson, 2016, p. 231). Their creative energies enable them to draw from the past to envision a future with diverse yields. The effect of the historical conflict between Killmonger's and T'Challa's fathers returns as a disruptive legacy to haunt the sons long after the fathers are dead. Yet, it is an unsettling test that would reposition T'Challa to his urgent leadership responsibility to the people. His failed strategies and sense of abandonment demonstrate that victory might not always emanate from being on the "right side".

Contradiction and Future Narratives

Black Panther relies on the framework of dual consciousness to affirm how Afrofuturist imagination could leverage some technological, economic, and socio-cultural breakthroughs to decenter colonizing structures. Even at the level of fictional speculation, the film constructs this realm of dual consciousness as a space for understanding both the challenges and possibilities for the triumph of Blackness (Gatune, 2010, p. 104). While Wakanda's advanced technology could benefit the rest of the world, Wakanda would equally require what others have to achieve socio-economic and technocultural sufficiency. The film's dual fictional spaces also construct a border point in which contemporary African knowledge intersects with its radically reimagined future version. When Marx and Engels (1959, p. 166) applied the law of contradiction in things to the study of the socio-historical process, they discovered the clash between the exploiting and exploited classes and the resultant conflict between the economic base and its anarchic superstructure, which often leads to the transformation of the ruled to the ruler and the reverse transformation of the ruler to the ruled.

There is an overriding opposition between the economic (the film as commodity) and the cultural (the film as a weapon of resistance), which exemplifies the idea of dualism that is central to Marx and Lenin's thesis. From the perspective of the film-as-art, *Black Panther* is both a lucrative cultural commodity and a potent emancipatory cultural artefact. Wasko (2003, p. 9) argues that analysing film as both a cultural artefact and a commodity allows us to identify contradictions in the communication industries as sites of power, thereby highlighting spaces to create 'strategies for intervention, resistance and change'. Seen from a critical political economy lens, the film and its derivative commodities are owned and controlled by The Walt Disney Company. It is a "cinematic art made possible through the financial resources of the entity that owns the means of producing, exhibiting, and distributing the art – the Walt Disney Company, which determines success based on returns on economic investments" (Shenid Bhayroo, 2019, p. 2). Despite the powerful position of its producer, the film's popularity provides Afrofuturism's counter-hegemonic critique of colonialism. It also offers Afrofuturist intellectuals and producers the lens to understand and challenge the colonial superstructure that has sought to erase Black history. To be sure, the economic and cultural tension within the film can be resolved when the colonial experience is seen as a reminder and push for Africa to see the vestiges of colonialism as catalysts for its future transformation. This future will be made manifest from the continued interaction of competing elements that inform and shape each other.

In constructing Wakanda as a nation that has never been colonized, Coogler seems to reverse the old order by drawing a comparison between a colonized, misrepresented Africa and an imaginary Africa without colonial experience to reinforce the possibility of transcending the Western-centric stereotypical imagination of Africa and Africans. Thus, its attempt to repudiate white characters and cultures as exotic, comical and absurd, which we encounter in many of the othering jokes that abound in the film, positions *Black Panther* as a postcolonial film in the radical sense. For instance, Okoye once remarks, "Guns, so primitive," regarding the West and Western cultures. Shuri also laughs haughtily after calling the CIA Agent Ross a "colonizer." These are instances of the ways through which the film challenges traditional depictions of African nations, showcasing the fictional African country of Wakanda as a global technological leader. Wakandans are also portrayed as comfortable citizens in global settings, while the nation delivers social aid to the US, reversing the typical global flow of assistance (Giana Eckhardt, 2018, p. 2). Wakanda is, therefore, depicted as a Blacktopia, where societies thrive beyond the reach of white supremacy as they have not been subjected to colonization. However, the double consciousness that influences the structure of the film is to be discerned in the conflicting depictions of Wakanda. First, it is portrayed as a powerful African

utopia that is meant to reshape the global black experience, and on the other hand, its isolationist, tribalist, and clannish mentality makes them insensitive to the need for true black African solidarity and intercultural communication. This is evident in the age-old African diasporan conflict in the film. However, it is this same tribalist sentiment that builds the foundation for Wakanda's cultural identity.

Marx and Lenin's notion of a world in which opposites are yoked together is foregrounded within the above frame of cultural contradiction. For Galtung (1996), societal clashes are a platform to explore alternative futures. Using the conflict triangle for conflict transformation, he shows that individuals and groups have incompatible goals, which lead to tensions (pp. 71-72). He thus deepens his analysis of conflict to demonstrate the place of understanding in managing and turning conflicts into peace (Galtung, 2000, p. 2). Viewing the conflicts within Wakandan tribes as strengths and weaknesses at once could stimulate the nation into positive renegotiation of its future. For instance, T' Challa and Killmonger experience both death and resurrection to connect with ancestral homelands - discovering for themselves the benefits and risks of memory and mistaken loyalty to predecessors and ancestral antagonisms - so, too, must Afrofuturist visionaries and "artivists" like Coogler resurrect sequential realms that embrace possibility and danger from within and without the African world (Guthrie, 2015, p. 24). A Wakanda nation that locks its doors against the world suffers the precarity of standing alone. Killmonger's statement that "People die every day. That's just part of life around here" speaks to the ideation that "death" and "life" are blended. The blend of "death and resurrection," "benefits and risks", "loyalty to predecessors and ancestral antagonisms", "possibility and danger", and "within and without" also illuminates the necessity of harnessing the disparate elements in Wakanda for the realization of its prosperous dreams. Without these paradoxes and ideological struggles to resolve them, the Wakanda nation, and therefore Africa, ceases to exist. This suggests that there is an interaction of opposites from beginning to end in the process of development.

Further still, in presenting diverse shades of cultural contradictions, Wakanda's advanced technology but also isolation, the film's conception of Wakanda seems to contradict the broader historical experiences of Black communities in the diaspora and continental Africa in a way that potentially reinforces colonial and neocolonial ideas. Wakanda's advanced civilization and deliberate isolation inadvertently reinforce the neocolonial sentiments that Africans are incapable of achieving greatness on their own. Moreover, the film's blend of Afro-futuristic elements with traditional African imagery and landscapes is both a strength and a potential source of war. That is, the depictions of African culture and heritage appear to oversimplify the complexities of African identity. Specifically, the fashion assemblage in the film highlights both an African fashion mosaic as well as a cultural appropriation. The portrayal of Korea and Koreans as a backdrop for the narrative, while focusing on the story of Killmonger and T'Challa, fails to make visible the intersectional racial inequality that is intertwined among races.

Sohail Inayatullah (2008, p. 5) identifies "six pillars" of African future thinking in the film, such as "mapping, anticipating, timing, deepening, creating alternatives, and transforming" approaches that dictate behaviour in African-descendant communities. This agrees with the new role T'Challa maps for Wakanda, which anticipates the need for intervention and assistance beyond war and revenge. He suggests mechanisms that create alternatives within the Black ghettoes where Killmonger and others were raised and also "transforms what social and political policy would or could mean for advanced nations who have goods and resources in abundance" (Gutherie, 2019, p. 24). However, appropriating these strategies may not be a guarantee of futures' thinking that old behaviours and disruptions could be overcome. For Inayatullah, we remain tied to old patterns of behavior even as the future disrupts. However, the successful construction of double consciousness in the film helps to reinforce the hypothesis that African peoples can transcend colonizing contexts while redefining "colonialism" and leveraging its technological, socio-economic and cultural advances. The consciousness offered by *Black Panther* is a "third space" for African futures that requires rejecting "aid" that constrains future development on the continent and thinking in ways that "defy conventions" (Gatune, 2010, p. 104). The film demonstrates that successful futures for Africa require "embracing a Pan-African imagination and Black solidarity that is optimistic about the future (Guthrie, 2019, p. 24). This is a significant departure from how Black culture, consciousness and politics have been earlier depicted.

Conclusion

This paper has shown, through an analysis of the Afrofuturist reconstruction of the ethics of dialectical materialism how Coogler's *Black Panther* contributes to the debate about the role of African speculative fiction in recreating Black African futures. It demonstrates the perspectives through which the film represents Africa's attempt to renegotiate its way into the future, an idea that has become a potent issue in Afrofuturist discourse and African Futures Studies. As a decidedly black creation, Afrofuturism goes far beyond the limitations of white-centered imagination to show that black people will exist in the future, with advanced techno-culture. Interestingly, Lenin's dialectical materialism and the Igbo notion of complementary duality invoked in this analysis proved to be viable theoretical strategies for understanding the place of dualism and the unity of opposites in the film. In a significant way, both theories have demonstrated that the successful construction of double consciousness in the film reinforces the hypothesis that Africa could transcend colonizing contexts and simultaneously achieve future progress by redefining "colonialism" and leveraging its technological, socio-economic and cultural advances. This potential achievement is hinted at in the film's call for creative harmonization of internal contradictions in Wakanda's future thinking. Yet, in its broader context, the conflation of indigenous and foreign theory in the analysis helps us to remodel African futures beyond Western linearity. Both strategies function as a philosophical infrastructure for apprehending the image within, which are divided in their connection, in which Africans are whole, in which they are home. This home is, if potentially, full of endless possibilities. If this home were Wakanda, then it would be a home with cultural and aesthetic disparities that would be homogenised to secure the terrain for Black African futures given that these disparities are at the same time complementary and are implicated in each other. Through this argument, the paper suggests that conflicts are inevitable in cultural renegotiation and that transforming such conflicts will engender an Africa that is independent and prosperous, yet connected to the rest of the world.

Notes

Lenin's Dialectical materialism which has Russian background is combined with the Igbo notion of Complementary Duality as expounded by Chinua Achebe. See Scafes, S. (2002). Where something stands, something else will stand beside it: Ambivalence in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God. Changing English* 9.2, 1-15.

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