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Redefining the Colonial: An Afrofuturist Analysis of Wakanda and Speculative Fiction

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Abstract

The world of Wakanda, as depicted in the film Black Panther (2018), provided an opportunity for viewers to bask in the glorious scenes, heroic drama, Black feminist power, and guile of an African world bordering on the fantastic. Starving audiences seeking Black filmic culture eagerly settled for Wakandan fantasy - based on the filmmaker's magnificent achievement to build a fanciful and engaging vision for Black viewers and comic-book aficionados alike. It was a significant relief to enjoy Black Panther, even with its errant vision of thuggish conflict by an anti-hero whose rationale for sharing Wakandan technology to save Africans in the diaspora made sense - though his violent demand for war-like resolution did not. It was also an unfortunate plot line to make a white CIA agent a hero, or to depict the United Nations as the platform for peacefully bringing Wakanda to light. But these are side issues to the main conceptual framework, and dilemma, presented by the film: What does a modern African nation look like, if it has not been created though colonialism? Can African-Diasporic art, culture, language, music and cinematography provide a foundation for envisioning a "Wakandan" world that is neither utopic nor dystopic? How do we redefine Afro-Diasporic possibility, existing outside of colonial, neocolonial and postcolonial imaginations?

While addressing such issues, we should not belittle Black Panther's global cinematic accomplishment, but instead seek to deploy Afrofuturist analytics to narrowly examine two questions: How does an imaginary realm of the African world - untouched by colonialism - affirm Black genius and futurity to enable current generations to de-program ourselves and combat anti-Black racism? And, how can Black speculative fiction re-fashion a de-colonial space beyond Wakanda, in the current nation-states and community places within which Afro-diasporic peoples struggle daily for sustenance, power, and joy?

Using the complex array of Afrofuturist and global Pan-Africanist analyses provided by theorists such as Eshun (2003), Anderson and Jones (2015), Mudimbe (1988), and futurists such as Inayatullah (2008), Sardar (2009), and Gatune (2010, 2011), this essay examines how Wakanda exists within colonial spaces and how Black speculative fiction (as well as the Black Panther film itself) depend upon a de-colonial imagination for sustenance and legibility.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, Black Speculative Fiction, African-Diaspora, De-colonialism, Black Panther.

I was thinking, 'How do you design for the Afro-futuristic model in Wakanda and root it in history?'- Ruth E. Carter, 2019 Oscar for Best Costume Design (Entertainment Weekly, Feb. 1, 2019, p. 28).

Although in African history the colonial experience represents but a brief moment from the perspective of today, this moment is still charged and controversial, since, to say the least, it signified a new historical form and the possibility of radically new types of discourses on African traditions and cultures. -V.Y. Mudimbe (1988, p.14).

Is there a Black world that exists outside of the colonial imagination? If so, how can we envision it, while still referencing Black historiography and an Afro-Diasporic cultural ethos already rooted in the colonial, enslavement, and post-colonial periods? The most facile answer would be: "That's what Black Panther does!" But a comic-book reality, transposed to cinematic immediacy, can hardly begin to address the complexity contained in the above comments by a costume-designer and an African philosopher.

Both Carter and Mudimbe capably summarize the dilemma (and the delight) in configuring a global Blackness that builds on historical veracity - there are both magnificent and startlingly brutal examples of African reality which exist as foundations for compelling stories. Carter's seemingly impossible task was made simpler because Black Panther has been visualized since 1966 in comic-book form, in updated graphic series, and in screenplays that ably depict a parallel world in which Wakanda exists - outside of material coloniality. Indeed, the superhero/superpower genre invites speculative optics that are loosely based on the facts: there are African peoples, diasporic concerns, and geo-political racial spatiality that can be fashioned into a narrative fabric that is entertaining and educational for those yet uninformed about the Pan-African world. In short, Carter - in creating Afrocentric fashion designs that are both replications of the past and glimpses of the future - touches on the very foundation of Afrofuturism's appeal to Blackness, global spatiality, and an empowered presence that is propelled by techno- and ethno-futures. Her designs provide a vision of Afrofuturism through clothing, hairstyles, and other accouterments that build on existing African-Diasporic culture. These elements are foremost in Black Panther, and they seem to affirm Afrofuturist speculative formations of the past twenty years by using fabric and innovative designs that extend beyond technological advancements (Anderson & Jones, 2015; Dery, 2007; Eshun, 2003; Yaszek, 2005).

And yet, as Mudimbe notes, "a new historical form and the possibility of new types of discourses," also emerges out of the colonial experience that impinges on our comprehension of the African world - if only for a "brief moment." These freedom dreams and Afrocentric discourses have inspired Black and African resistance leaders and communities formed during the colonial period (beginning with the Berlin Conference, 1884-1885), and during protracted warfare against the British, Belgians, Boers, French, German, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian would-be conquerors who practiced genocidal campaigns throughout the late 19th and mid-20th centuries. Although the Africans lost their independence (only two African countries escaped extended colonization - Ethiopia and Liberia) they gained a colonial and neocolonial presence and challenged other nations to uphold human rights, to respect constitutional mandates and pathways to independence and legibility, and inspired an insurgent African nationalism that was nothing less than heroic. Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Sir Seretse and Ruth Khama, and others displayed "superhuman" zeal and capacity for mobilizing their peoples against oppression. They could not have accomplished so much without the heroic struggles of the African masses in each of their countries, but they came to embody the powerful movements that extended beyond human dimensions. And more - their stories were reified into a type of mythic power that continues to frame discussions and understanding of African resistance today. There is a "mythic appetite" for

African heroes and "sheroes" who avoid victimization or cruelty - compared to Hollywood's typical obsession with Black degradation and abjectness (Guthrie, 2015, 2013).[1]

That these "superheroes" emerged during the latter half of the twentieth century - and the era in which Black culture provided alternative strategies for human progress, civil rights, moral and ethical standards that inspired others - cannot be attributed to mere reaction to colonial oppression and the afterlife of enslavement and systemic racism. Black culture and consciousness provided flexible pathways for uplift beyond conventional battles for rights-based progress. Black singers, musicians, athletes, artists - as well as spokesmen and women for justice - used every venue for achieving acknowledgment and moral hegemony. Blackness, as a "superhuman" trait leveraged within national and international imaginations, re-emerges in twenty-first century cultural realms through the dream visions, music, art and culture reflecting African-descendant life and struggles around the world (Anderson, 2016). Black historiography extended beyond the "grammar of suffering" (Wilderson, 2010) into dark speculative fictions found in various art forms: Black music, dance, comic books, novels and films that pre-dated Black Panther (2018) and other cinematic, televisual, and social media commodities of the current generation (Cobb, 2018; Gray, 2004).

Black Panther's achievement, in many ways, depended upon the steady development of Black Spatial Imaginaries (Lipsitz, 2011) that were not bound by convention in the art world,[2] as well as on the professional skills and experience of Black artists, writers and filmmakers who proved their worth, and the value, of Black-themed commercial products. In this way, a Ruth Carter or Ryan Coogler could take the Marvel Comics universe and re-invent it through the experiences of Black people who were not circumscribed by pain, suffering and "abject Blackness" (Spillers, 1987; Wilderson, 2008, 2010) - but who were inspired by "dark speculative" art forms embodying multiple aspects of Black life.

The examples of Black speculative art forms predating Black Panther are numerous: Southern artists who used music as philosophical foundations of a "Blues Epistemology" - as noted by Clyde Woods (1998), it is not simply about sorrow or victimhood, but determination to laugh at danger and to overcome seemingly impossible conditions; church leaders who invoked sections of the Bible as liberation tracts for overcoming oppression, and others, like Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. - and Jr. - who evinced Black pride before it was a commonly accepted term; Martin King's orations built on cadences and "unity of humanity" themes already heralded by Paul Robeson, folk singers, shouters and evangelistic preachers espousing a new life in post-war America; writers such as Du Bois, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison bent the American literary canon into alternative, speculative fictions that imagined another world beyond racial exclusion; sculptors, dancers, poets and painters from the Harlem Renaissance up through the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s used their tools and artwork to glorify "Blackness as a thing of beauty" - to quote Ossie Davis, who used humor and comedy to poke wry fun at racial segregation in his stage play, "Purlie Victorious." Each in their own way, used art and cultural creations to elevate Black life as a parallel venue for configuring the past and future - these presaged the literary arc that Black Panther's writers (Ta Nehisi Coates, Reginald Hudlin, and others) relied upon to "reboot" and reinterpret the 1960s comic-book series for audiences of the "twenty-oh-ohs," and beyond.

But there's more: as Coogler imagined an Afro-Diasporic fiction he wielded Black Panther to concretize Du Boisian double consciousness and, in some cases, triple consciousness - by including African Indigeneity (Du Bois, 1903; Washington, 2012). Du Bois had a clear notion of American/ Negro dichotomies, but his awareness of African Indigeneity in 1903 was yet unfounded. As was made apparent in Black Panther, there is a difference between African and Black American consciousness and global conditions. This was part of the triple conflict that T'Challa and Erik Killmonger wrestle with; although there are African retentions in Gullah culture, and in Black Indian and Vodun traditions in New Orleans and the South, urban awareness of an African presence was awaiting discovery by Black America; and it was found in the Black Power movement, the

Black Consciousness movement, and resurrected in Afrofuturistic Wakanda. This is partially why Carter, Coogler and his production team could envision a "non-colonial Wakanda" that was evocative of African culture from Xhosa, Zulu, Basotho, Maasai, Ndebele, Igbo, Tuareg, and other African peoples who had survived colonialism. It's a third level of consciousness that could not have been predicted by Du Bois in 1903 - prior to his involvement with African liberation movements. 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) and, at the same time, evocative of African-Diasporic realities. Moving beyond the invention of Africa, to instead inspire innovation and imagination, global Blackness in Wakanda is a cultural realm in which consciousness and innovation are promoted in a welcoming, productive, speculative space. Coogler's achievement is to coalesce elements that already exist - and elevate them as part of a 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 valorize Black humanity, and celebrate Black artifacts, masks, robes, weapons, and language that are part of a global Black legacy.

The histories of colonialism and enslavement are real, and have continued effects today, as noted by Gatune and others (Gatune & Najam, 2011; Inayatullah, 2008; Sardar, 2009). But the interpretation of that history requires movement beyond victim narratives and continued oppression:

> *History is the most powerful and unused tool in Africa's arsenal. Africans are currently taught a history that is overtly and covertly focused on European achievements and their domination of Africa, peppered with some triumphs from African independence struggles, followed by African failures during neocolonialism, cold war struggles, and debt burdens. It is a story that is at the very least disempowering (Gatune, 2010, p.110).*

It is that history that makes Black Panther such a delightful and dilemma-filled experience for viewers. The film's attraction exceeds discursive confines, while summoning contexts within literary, social and political tropes that are seemingly irresistible. As we gaze upon Black Panther we are hailed by our desire to see, hear, and experience Black culture, codes and projected authenticity that are rarely evident in mass media such as Hollywood film. But, through the colonization of our desire to see Black folk on the screen, our imaginative dreams fuel a libidinal economy of race and Blackness that is lucrative and rewarding (Sexton, 2010).

Black Panther and Wakanda are viable reflections of Black aesthetics and resistant ethos: they provide an insider's glimpse of the significance of Black culture to our communities around the world. Thus, while Coogler can fashion an attractive and celebratory Black fantasy for viewers - stunning costumes, music, architecture, as well as inventive weaving together of disparate Afro-Diasporic cultures and rituals - he is yet beholden to the mythic appetites (Guthrie, 2013) of the Hollywood dream machine that leverages Black desires for rich, complex stories appealing to common themes (tradition vs. modernity; father vs. son/cousin vs. cousin; intertribal conflicts - even within a seemingly "utopic" Wakandan world; grace, guile and emergent feminism vs. male violence and self-destruction, etc.) that are part of the Marvel Comics universe.

Coogler's Black Panther is successful for at least two reasons: Black culture has proven value in US commerce and industry (Hollywood was rescued by Blaxploitation films of the 1970s - providing much-needed capital for blockbusters such as Jaws and Star Wars; Hip Hop culture and rap music revived the music industry in the 1980s-1990s by creating art forms that were affordable to produce and distribute to mass audiences); and the global hegemony of US culture (particularly comic-book, sci-fi and speculative fiction commodities) provided easy entry and diffusion through international markets that were already arrayed for film and literary products promoted through the Internet and new social media outlets (Benshoff, Griffin, 2009, pp.85-87; Watkins, 1998, pp.94-96).[3]
It is also successful because of the growing fascination with Afrofuturist vehicles that provide a new

face to imaginative worlds that were previously the stronghold of white sci-fi enthusiasts (Jemisin, 2010). Embracing technology and human progress depicted in novels or comic books is nothing new - but the creation of international art commodities for non-white, multi-racial, and post-modern audiences is.

Coogler's experimental reshaping of the Marvel superhero universe - to appeal to global Blackness and Afrofuturism - was an adventurous gamble that paid off because it addressed social concerns, racialized space, and technological innovation through Black perspectives. It was successful, in part, because it provided a glimpse of how to reframe "the Negro problem" (Du Bois, 1903) into a solution of social drama, international geopolitics, and Afro-Diasporic culture. Coogler depicts a "problem" this is not about white saviors - but about culture, knowledge practices and aesthetics that sustain Black people in real-world Oakland, on the African continent, and in a fictive Wakanda. Black Panther seemed to rework the "trauma drama" arising out of colonialism, enslavement and anti-Black racism, while evincing a hopeful portrayal of Blackness and technology that problematizes both (Guthrie, 2015, 2013).[4] Coogler focuses on Black agency to address continued oppression - neither T'Challa nor Erik Killlmonger have "the answer" to a problem haunting the African-Diasporic world, but they both seek resolution to the rupture between blood cousins on both sides of the Atlantic. Their personal trajectories are difficult, painful and incomplete - much like the unresolved relationships between and among African-descendant peoples around the world.

Most sci-fi films, trapped by genre and production constraints, double down on making white viewers comfortable and dominant; Black Panther turns this convention on its head, and instead appeals to resistant viewers, eager to acknowledge Black legibility beyond suffering and victimhood. Although Black Panther represents problematic dichotomies and questionable plotlines, it does provide a compelling cinematic foundation for asking the right questions. It begins the dialogue, a public conversation, among and between Afro-Diasporic peoples and larger audiences around the world. As noted jazz historian and musician Salim Washington commented, in a blog posted after viewing Black Panther in a South African movie theatre:

> [E]ven before analyzing the text of the film, the reception already tells us that we are having a public conversation/demonstration of our pride in ourselves; our need to envision ourselves as beautiful, cool, powerful, wise and visionary; our need to celebrate the genius and courage of our women… and so on and so forth. The actual celebration raised the screening to a cultural event. At some point there is the question of the revolutionary efficacy of Black pleasure, especially of this kind. –Salim Washington (Feb. 19, 2018 Facebook post).

It is the assessment of this essay that the Afrofuturism embodied within Black Panther provides a venue to address vexing concerns through art, film and culture, even as it resists providing an "answer" to the question: "Can African-descendant peoples combine culture and technology to save themselves - and the world"? This filmic accomplishment provides a possible "way out of no way" (Ellison, 1952) - to counter the traumatic, enduring colonialism/enslavement narratives, and to confront them through an Afro-Diasporic reckoning. A film is not a political policy or governmental directive controlling people's destinies, but the narratives and tropes captured within cinema oftentimes reflect verifiable attitudes and approaches of racial societies like the United States, South Africa, Britain, Australia, etc., that are desperately in need of social transformation (Inayatullah, 2008).

What will endure? The haunting of race and oppression as narratives of pain and victimhood (much to the desire of audiences attracted to the spectacle of Black abject suffering), or the cinematic depiction of techno-ethnofutures that "solve" the riddle of technology/progress amidst continued racial and ethnic division? Technology and futurist cultural productions attempt to portray

worlds in which race has been erased - but Black Panther inventively explores how technology, and race, is about more than machines. In the next section, we will examine scenes that reflect these troubled questions and concerns.

Abjection vs. Afro-Futurism? The Black Spatial Imaginary Behind the Veil

I think the main beneficiaries of [Black Panther] will be the young folks, both in the Diaspora and in Africa… [To them] colonialism is mostly something that happened back in the day… They don't see the ways in which corruption at home is linked to multinational banks and corporations and to the mindsets established and nurtured by divide and rule and indirect rule. –Facebook post (Feb. 19, 2018).

Just bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships, 'cause they knew death was better than bondage. –Erik Killmonger, orphaned Prince of Wakanda, in his dying comments to King T'Challa.

The power of Black Panther is that it imagines a place that could be home to millions who don't have one. –Marc Bernardin, Entertainment Weekly (Feb. 1, 2019, p.30).

There has always been a quest for legibility and freedom among African-descendant peoples -even as pop cultural artists and writers wrestled with images that reflected an overdetermined "Blackness" that bordered on stereotypes. Blackness as a superpower was not so far-fetched, given the sports heraldry of transformative figures such as Jackie Robinson, Althea Gibson, and Wilt Chamberlain - for example, after Robinson completed a superhuman catch, the Montreal Royals manager, Clay Hopper, turned to Branch Rickey and asked: "Do you really think a nigger's a human being?" It was a racist comment, but one which acknowledged Robinson's talents on the field of play that exceeded all others. In 1962, Chamberlain scored 100 points all by himself, as the Philadelphia Warriors defeated the New York Knicks in a blow-out win in basketball. Althea Gibson's successes on the tennis court were monumental during the 1950s. In film and theatre, however, Black superheroes were largely absent - until the mid-1960s, when a comic book character was created by Stan Lee for Marvel.

Although it began in 1966, Black Panther has far exceeded the sociopolitical era that gave rise to the original character who appeared in a Fantastic Four edition. Those unfamiliar with the original comic book series begun by Lee (and the re-launch of the series created by different writers such as Reginald Hudlin - 2005-08, and Ta Nehisi Coates - 2016-18) were still enthused by the hype and anticipated major studio release of the film in early 2018. In the 1966 launch of Black Panther, T'Challa was like a "superpowered Patrice Lumumba" - according to Todd Burroughs, referring to the charismatic Congo leader who was deposed and assassinated by the CIA in 1961 (Burroughs, 2018). Later, Marvel's white authors and artists labored to distance the comic book from the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, founded in October 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California. Both Huey and Bobby were aware of the power of popular culture and the thirst for political symbols that exuded Black pride, but their political organization eschewed cultural nationalism reflected in the Black Panther series. Later, more nationalistic and Afrofuturist storylines created by Hudlin, Coates and others helped popularize Black Panther for new audiences, and set the stage for Marvel's gamble on Ryan Coogler's film production skills.

Indeed, fans and the uninitiated were already arranging screening dates, field trips, and student assignments for Black History Month long before February 18, 2018. The appeal of major Black actors - both US-born African Americans and major African stars - provided evidence that Black Panther would not be shortchanged, but instead reflect a powerful array of proven artistry. When

Coogler (director of Fruitvale Station and Creed) signed on, he brought with him a zeal for Black filmmaking and social engagement that rivaled the accomplishments of others in the film industry. Coogler's research skills and meticulous approach to film production were considerable. He took pains to develop storylines, costumes, and Afro-authenticity that were thorough and respectful. "Black Panther is a unique movie told by a unique filmmaker in a unique time," says Kevin Feige, Marvel Studios chief and producer (Entertainment Weekly, Feb. 1, 2019, p.27).

Aside from the costumes, original designs, visual backdrops and arresting CGI cinematography, at the heart of Coogler's production was a compelling screenplay unbound by anything previously created under the Black Panther comic lineage. Yes, the Black Panther emerges out of a Wakandan world - founded on the discovery of "vibranium," and developed as a mystical, parallel African country which was invisible to other people - and the central plot does question its existence and contributions to solving world problems; but the predictability of the storyline ends there. Black Panther is inhabited by strong, effective women leaders who overshadow Chadwick Boseman's "T'Challa" - who is revealed to be hesitant and rather naïve about his own leadership. His sister Shuri (Letitia Wright), his love interest, Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o), and Dora Milaje leader, Okoye (Danai Gurira), all have strong character development and complex back stories that make them interesting, compelling and powerful figures in their own right. This is revealed in the main CGI Wakanda unveiling, and the following scenes:

- Ritual burial of the Black Panther, Re-birth as the King;
- The final battle scene between T'Challa and Killmonger;
- Shuri's interaction with CIA agent Everett K. Ross (Martin Freeman), and her experimental technological inventions;

In each of these scenes, Coogler lays a visual, sonic, and imaginative rationale founded on a Black aesthetic that affirms Black cultural norms beyond what is typically presented in Hollywood. He makes legible a global Blackness - Anderson and Jones might call it an "Astro-Blackness" - but this can be debated after the sequel is created (Anderson & Jones, 2015). And that global Blackness extends beyond the haunting of racial trauma, social dislocation, economic disempowerment, and political impotency of African nations in the modern world. This, then, builds on Eshun's clarifying statement that Afrofuturism provides a "tool kit" for Afro-Diasporic peoples to intervene on behalf of "modernity" - to create futures in the present, based on speculative imagination that exceeds anything previously created by [white] sci-fi writers and filmmakers:

> *Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken. ... As a tool kit developed for and by Afrodiasporic intellectuals, the imperative to code, adopt, adapt, translate, misread, rework, and revision these concepts ... is likely to persist in the decades to come (Eshun, 2003, p. 301).*

This is a major departure from "futures" thinkers who declare that technology and sci-fi imaginations describe future worlds in which machines and humans settle social inequities and discordant divisions between races, genders, and hierarchical worlds. But can a film, music, art, literature, or cultural production play the role of social actant, enabling transformations necessary to re-envision Blackness and Afro-descendant progress? Black Panther, and Afrofuturism in general, provide an "avenue" for addressing this question - even as the film resists providing "an answer…" The conflict between T'Challa and Erik is not fully resolved by Killmonger's death - we may even expect another resurrection. However, it won't occur in some parallel universe - hidden from view

in Wakanda, but in an Afro-Diasporic world in which ascendant beings and Black superheroes emerge together, wrestling with their own limitations, beyond the trauma of the past.

Further, a science-fiction film - trapped by genre and production constraints - can only provide a glimpse, and a semblance of imaginative possibilities beyond the screen. It imitates life, and "life becomes a dream…" For example, in the early part of the film, when Okoye, Nakia, and T'Challa return from a rescue mission somewhere in West Africa, they fly into the Wakandan airspace and pastoral fields and dusty grasslands shimmer and evaporate - revealing the "true" Wakanda of architectural splendor, African-motif buildings, and technologically enhanced scenery of "home". The reveal is similar to flying beyond the "veil" that separates Black life from larger society - as Du Bois famously described in his 1903 classic The Souls of Black Folks. The symbolic piercing of the veil reveals a magnificent splendor that few imagine for Africa - but it is deeply rooted in Black societies that already exist in the real world. What's unique is how Coogler and associates imaginatively borrow from ethnographies of Africa, without summoning up the social architecture of colonialism. This is not your "Banana Republic," or your exotic jungle retreat!

This filmic accomplishment departs from typical sci-fi imaginations to depict a Black cultural ethos that successfully merges different trends and elements from the African diaspora. It is as if the filmmaker grasped the key theme of Du Boisian double-consciousness and magnified that which is usually submerged, as the Blues song goes: "Got two faces for the world to see /One's for whitefolks/ the Other's for me!" - (Anonymous).

Within Wakanda, the technological developments (flying vehicles, underground railways powered by vibranium, magnificent markets and urban/rural interfaces - and an egalitarian society that appears to cherish and respect Black women leaders) are depicted in glorious detail. All are hidden behind a veil of African impoverishment and powerlessness - the deceptive narrative of victimhood that all too commonly describes other African nations (Gatune, 2010; Sardar, 2009). But the Wakandan world beyond the veil is not without conflict - this is no unblemished utopia in which Black super-beings can hide from everyone else. Black Panther excels at explaining both the superhuman achievements powered by vibranium, but also the quest to overcome schisms within African clans residing in Wakanda. As one of the central conflicts of the film, we discover how Wakandans interrogate the value of royal lineage, unquestioned leadership, and ancestral worship. This occurs in the challenge to T'Challa, issued by M'baku of the Jabari tribe, which has separated itself from the four other clans. The ritual battle to the death can't proceed to its logical end - which allows T'Challa to claim a future ally when the chips are down. The combat scenes also fulfill major premises of Marvel superhero-dom: they each have to prove that their true powers emerge after they overcome human frailties. T'Challa is no different, even as he drinks the potion derived from the heart-shaped herb cultivated by Wakandan priests, and takes his place as the "rightful heir" to the throne - more to come later. A good action film, however, relies on effective fight sequences, and viewers are rewarded with several, occurring on different continents around the world.

T'Challa has to undergo two deaths, and resurrections, as a testament to his worthiness - even as he displays questionable leadership at key points in the drama. The final battle scene with Killmonger deploys tribe against tribe to challenge Killmonger's control, but it is T'Challa who has to demonstrate that his strength comes, not from vibranium, the herb potion, or his technologically enhanced panther suit - but from his guile, cunning, and battle training. T'Challa uses the short-stabbing spear that Killmonger created from a longer spear (resurrecting the Shaka Zulu death instrument that transformed African battle strategies during the 1800s), to overcome his antagonist in his third battle to the death in the film. The struggle between cousins occurs on an underground railway in Wakanda - which is another echo of African-descendant heritage - providing a pathway to freedom for T'Challa and a reckoning for Killmonger: He acknowledges T'Challa's skills, finally, but rejects the offer for healing from the death wound. He famously invokes the memory of thousands of Africans who chose death during the Middle Passage, rather than completing transport

by slave ship to the new world: "They knew death was better than bondage…" Killmonger's death was anticipated, but the ending of the film leaves open the possibility of his return - as there is no clear burial for him.

As for Shuri, and the women fighters of the Dora Milaje, as well as the shrewd political activities of Nakia, Okoye, and T'Challa's mother - the film demonstrates a playful come-uppance at several points within the drama, beginning with Okoye and Shuri chiding T'Challa for "freezing" when speaking to Nakia. There is a coy interaction between the players and the one white character who broaches Wakanda behind the veil - much to the chagrin of the women leaders. For instance, at one point Shuri blurts out: "Don't scare me like that, colonizer!" as CIA agent Everett Ross wakes up to find himself in her laboratory. The script is cognizant of the dubious role played by white CIA agents in Africa, but it accedes to the conventional "buddy" relationship between a key Black protagonist (T'Challa) and a white male sidekick (Everett), who provides comic relief - rather than allowing Everett to bleed to death, T'Challa brings him to Wakanda, risking intervention and exposure. Shuri's exclamation invokes knowledge that Ross/CIA is out of place in Wakanda - and yet, she understands her role is to heal those who could potentially bring downfall to the hidden African nation.

The playfulness masks true ingenuity and strength of these women, however, revealing a powerful resonance among key players. Shuri, for instance, is the inventor of vibranium products and instruments for healing and for warfare; she is continually testing and challenging others to embrace new uses of vibranium within society, and is fearless in the face of danger. In the end, it is not her playfulness nor her ingenuity that are needed - it is the raw power of violent resistance and the unity of previously strained tribal affiliation with the Jabari that lead to T'Challa's victory over Killmonger, and the turncoat "Border Tribe." In lesser hands, these internal conflicts would summon narratives of tribal savagery - as between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, or between Xhosa and Zulu in South Africa, or between Luo and Kikuyu in Kenya. But Coogler is going for something grander: Conflict is endemic, but African-Diasporic unity can be achieved through earnest struggle. Without these conflicts, and contradictions, societies may become static and unable to overcome new challenges, as Sardar (2009) mentions:

> *Contradictions may be paradoxical but they perform a very useful function. They provide us with a perspective which prevents oversimplified analysis of problems or situations. We are forced to consider clashing trends, viewpoints, facts, hypothesis, and theories and realize that the world is not amenable to naïve one-dimensional solutions (p. 6).*

Being on the "right side" does not always lead to victory - and T'Challa has to reckon with failed strategies, and abandonment, that led to a long-term conflict between Killmonger's father and T'Challa's father. The sins of the fathers were visited upon the sons, leaving T'Challa unsettled as to his own responsibility to the African Diaspora.

This is the heart of Afrofuturism's promise in Black Panther. An Afro-pessimist strategy (as represented by Killmonger) would emerge from a belief in revenge and violent resistance to white domination; An Afrofuturist view would seek technological solutions to overcome social dilemmas and political dislocation in the world (sharing Wakanda's innovations in healing, manufacturing durable goods cheaply - for instance - or simply intervening socially or politically). How will T'Challa proceed?

Beyond Wakanda: Overcoming Colonialism, Slavery and Its Afterlife

In the real world beyond Hollywood superhero filmdom, the trauma of the past continues to frame, occlude and prescribe artistic tropes and social discourses involving African-Diasporic peoples. What, then, to say about a mythic world that frames African sensibilities outside of

colonizing discourses? Is it possible to imagine African nations, and Afro-Diasporic communities, which do not rely upon social trauma and political oppression as framing contexts for struggle, joy, pain and celebration of African-descendant peoples?

Black Panther demonstrates two approaches to addressing these questions: On the one hand, it convincingly depicts an artistic, imaginative realm which evades the colonizing trope - but only partially - to provide a view of new social, political and economic possibilities in which women and advanced technological societies can take the lead. On the other hand, it provides Afrofuturistic (Black speculative fiction) lenses that embrace techno-futuristic artforms. The music, fashion, architecture, novels, comic books, and other elements within the screenplay invite viewers to re-imagine or rearrange existing stories about Blackness, embodied knowledge, and our shared historical, political and cultural heritages in new, transformative ways. As Anderson notes, there is an historical basis to such imaginations:

> *[P]ropelled by new thoughts and creative energy, members of this Black speculative movement have been in creative dialogue with the boundary of space-time, the exterior of the macro-cosmos and the interior of the micro-cosmos. Yet, there is a historical precedent for this movement around the concepts of the color line, the color curtain, and the digital divide (Anderson, 2016, p.231).*

The dialogue begun within Black Panther sounds the alarm for making interventions now, while there is still time. This is very similar to the strategies advocated by Sohail Inayatullah, who prescribes "six pillars" in Futures thinking to transform Africa. These six concepts are found within Black Panther in ample measure: "Mapping, Anticipating, Timing, Deepening, Creating Alternatives, and Transforming" policies and approaches that dictate behavior in African-descendant communities. T'Challa maps a new role for Wakanda, that anticipates the need for intervention and assistance beyond war and revenge. He times his new strategy with a keynote speech before the United Nations - deepening the impact of his newly-revealed technological prowess - and he suggests mechanisms that create alternatives within the Black ghettoes where Killmonger and others were raised. Finally, he transforms what social and political policy would or could mean for advanced nations who have goods and resources in abundance.

Inayatullah warns, however, that even embracing these six pillars of Futures thinking may not be enough to overcome old behaviors, and the disruption that is created by technological change:

> *And yet, even as the future disrupts, we remain tied to old patterns of behavior. We know we are more productive when we work from home, yet the 9-to-5 still dominates. We know that creating community hubs, which combine work and home, will reduce traffic congestion and pollution, yet millions make the daily commute to the office (p.5).*

The Black Panther framework seems to rely upon a successful construction of a double (or triple) consciousness: To affirm that African peoples can transcend colonizing contexts, while re-defining "colonialism" to take advantage of what's currently in place (i.e.: technology, economic, social and cultural advances from the African world). It would be impossible to depict outcomes that will emerge within both the artistic imagination and within the social spaces we inhabit - on the African continent, and within the African Diaspora. But Black Panther seems to offer a "third space" (or consciousness) that may evolve outside of previous options. As Gatune explains, the development beyond existing options may remain undefined or undefinable, but the future will require jettisoning victim scenarios, and rejecting "aid" that constrains future development on the African continent. Ultimately, it will be up to Africans to determine how that happens:

For Africa to develop, it has to think in ways that defy conventions. This means that Africa will need to think beyond aid as the central plank of its development plans. It will need transformations in its mindsets. This article seeks to expound on the theme of transformation, drawing from successes in Africa - present and past - to come up with out-of-the-box ideas for how Africa should forge ahead (Gatune, 2010, p.104).

This, then is Black Panther's success and challenge to all viewers: embracing a Pan-African imagination, constructing a "de-colonial" mindset, and identifying a Black solidarity that is optimistic about the future. This is possibly the extent of Coogler's departure from the Marvel universe - in depicting real-world concerns that elevate Black culture and consciousness to transform international politics beyond the conventions of Hollywood movie-gazing.

Conclusion: The Embodiment of Possibility

The postnormal world is a world of disproportion. Disproportionate distributions of power, wealth, resources and the effective demand to command the use of these resources are matched only by the disproportionate power our knowledge and techniques have given us to destroy the environment on which our affluence depends (Sardar 2009, p.10).

In many ways, Wakanda reflects postnormal realities that acknowledge disproportionate wealth and access to technology - only, it is ironically placed within an African continent that has undergone a Black reawakening and power realignment. Though Sardar warns of postnormal times, and the regularization of conflict and contradiction, he provides evidence that both can promote evolution and change.

Just as T'Challa and Killmonger had to experience 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 Ryan Coogler and his coterie of cinematic and comic-book protagonists resurrect sequential realms that embrace possibility and danger from within and without the African world. There may be limitations to the genre, and to the artform (which is essentially passive gazing, commodification, and fantasizing about African-resplendent technologies), but such speculative fictions provide a realignment of African-centered cultural movements - particularly if Coogler and his supporters are provided free rein to develop the genre further. By all acknowledgments, this is part of Jordan Peele's strategy for the future as well: To produce others' works and to make new films and televisual vehicles that revisit the place of race within cinema and entertainment. And, when these artistic products are screened, they provide pleasurable, celebratory moments for African-descendent peoples to imagine the future beyond the dilemmas posed by traumatic legacies of colonialism and enslavement.

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Notes

1. WEB Du Bois and African expatriates rallied for worldwide recognition of colonial peoples and states to be recognized by the League of Nations (1919), and by the fledgling United Nations (1945). In both cases, Du Bois's advocacy and those of his African colleagues for the liberation for Black humanity on the world stage were ignored. NAACP observers and African leaders abroad such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Leopold Senghor, and Kwame Nkrumah were rebuffed in the 1940s, as they sought independence of British, French, Belgian, and formerly-German colonies controlled by victorious allies. While Germany, Japan, and Italy had their colonies taken from them, US allies were rewarded with continued domination over Africa and most of the Third World. See: Nikhil Pal Singh, Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy (2005). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

2. George Lipsitz explains that "making unexpected use of public spaces has been a persistent theme for Black visual artists" (p.68) who transform "resorts of last resort into wonderfully festive and celebratory spaces of mutuality, community, and solidarity" (p.51). He writes: "Black spatial imaginary ... emerges from complex couplings of race and space…" and "views place as valuable and finite, as a public responsibility for which all must take stewardship" (p.69). See "The Black Spatial Imaginary", in How Race Takes Place (2011). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, pp.51-70.

3. Craig S. Watkins (1998) confirms that Hollywood lost millions of dollars before the cheaply produced and marketed "Blaxploitation" films rescued the film industry, and stabilized the market for evolving blockbuster films: "Between 1969 and 1971, the major film companies experienced huge financial losses…." [$52 million for Warner Brothers in 1969 and $77.4 million for 20th Century Fox and $45 million for United Artists in 1970]. "Blaxploitation… allowed the film industry to recoup some of its financial losses during this period of transition…" (pp.94-96). He cites similar cultural exploitation of Hip Hop artists who rescued the music industry and inspired cinematic themes that replicated "ghetto fabulous" storylines and idioms. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2009) explain that these films exploited Black consumers and then allowed Hollywood to focus on blockbuster film releases in mid-1970s like Jaws (1975) and Star Wars (1977) that recalibrated audience appeal through massive distribution and control of movie screens: "… these films exploited African American audiences... and took money out of African American communities to fill Hollywood's bank accounts" (p.84).

4. The "trauma drama" is a trope present in post-Civil Rights America, in which we can envision and suffer through the trauma of the "past" (enslavement, Jim Crow, debt peonage, etc.) so that we can feel good about the "present." By feeling bad, Americans can assuage their guilt over enslavement while ignoring its continuing aftermath in mass incarceration, voting disfranchisement, continued segregation and other racial ills. Film, music, TV, art of the last few decades emphasizes the power of individual catharsis that seemingly absolves Americans of responsible social policy to address the "Negro" problem that is no longer identified as racism but as something else that people experience as individuals beyond race. See: "Oprah Winfrey and the Trauma Drama: What's So Good about Feeling Bad?" (2013) by R. Guthrie, in Presenting Oprah Winfrey, Her Films, and African American Literature, ed., Tara Green, pp.45-78.

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