



(Re)imagining African futures: Wakanda and the politics of transnational Blackness

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ABSTRACT

Black Panther (2018) is now one of the most popular Hollywood movies across the globe featuring a predominantly Black cast. Its success lies not only in economic value, but also in its ability to present universal concerns of power, pride, and humanity from global Black perspectives. In this essay, we analyze *Black Panther* through the lens of postcolonial cultural critique guided by Afrofuturism to examine how the movie misrepresents itself as a vehicle for unifying complex histories of continental Africans and African diasporic perspectives on Blackness, home, and belonging. We argue that *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.” We conclude by stating that 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.

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Since its opening, *Black Panther* has become a destination event. Its impact on people of African ancestry has been especially notable. The seismic reaction from Black audiences around the globe is not only a response to the esthetic beauty and storytelling of the movie. It is as if audiences are experiencing mass psychic relief.—Renee T. White¹

In the *Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon pointed out that the linchpin of European colonization of Africa and other parts of the world centered on controlling both access to material resources such as gold, diamonds, fertile land and labor, and the imaginations of the Black self.² Even after achieving independence from European colonial rule, access to material resources and geopolitical power for many African countries is reserved for African elites with connections to Western corporations and governments. The absence of a complete break from colonial rule and its regulation of the Black body means “former” colonial powers and African elites continue to maintain a neocolonial and neo-liberal social order that continually stifles Black liberation, and economic and political independence of everyday Africans.³ Hence, director Ryan Coogler’s cinematic representation of Wakanda in *Black Panther* (2018) resonated with many Africans in continental Africa who continue to witness the lack of self-determination that independence was supposed to bring about. As White explains in the epigraph above, *Black Panther* functioned

as a “destination event” offering “mass psychic relief” to Black populations who continue to experience forms of dispossession and heightened surveillance.⁴

As African scholars in the diaspora who employ African feminist and queer African approaches to communication studies, we were elated to see *Black Panther* set in an imaginary African city where their material resources and labor are sealed off from Western regulation and surveillance. Wakanda is not just a reflection of what an African nation can be, but also a cinematic fantasy construction of how the Black world and Black consciousness can and do exist outside of the colonizing gaze of whiteness and coloniality. Unlike other Marvel superhero movies, *Black Panther* is unique because Black viewers in the U.S.A. and across the world see themselves “addressed by their name, not in the guise of Blackness itself.”⁵ Coogler presented an Afrofuturistic (re)imagination of an interconnected past by tapping into mythical memory, through the future, for the present. *Black Panther* draws on the shared histories among African Americans, diasporic Africans, and continental Africans of the Middle Passage by imagining a transnational Blackness that resists the cultural dislocation, estrangement, and alienation experienced by Black bodies everywhere.

Conversely, the Afrofuturist unifying theme of Blackness in *Black Panther*—as transnationally shared intimate relations of Blackness—yields too much to Western neocolonial and cinematic fantasies of “Africa.” Furthermore, visions of Black liberation politics embodied by the two main characters (T’Challa/Black Panther and Erik “Killmonger” Stevens) present a false choice to audience members unable to fully digest the nuanced intricacies of Black lives in the U.S.A. and continental Africa. These contradictions undergird Disney’s attempt to appear to depict an anti-colonial African nation while paradoxically legitimizing the existing political economy through neoliberal capitalist inclusionary tactics based on recognition and respectability politics. Said differently, Wakanda seems anti-colonial; however, Disney’s inclusion of “Africa” lacks a critical engagement with the contemporary material realities of the African continent. Coogler’s Afrofuturist representation of liberation and African diasporic yearnings for psychic relief fails to present a radical vision of transnational Blackness, which could challenge the systemic root causes of global social inequality. To address these concerns, we analyze *Black Panther* through the lens of postcolonial cultural critique guided by Afrofuturism to examine how the movie misrepresents itself as a vehicle for unifying complex histories of continental Africans and African diasporic perspectives on Blackness, home, and belonging. Coupling postcolonial theory and Afrofuturism allows us to theorize universal concerns of power, pride, and humanity from global Black perspectives.

Afrofuturism and the contested politics of transnational Blackness

Representations of Blackness do not inevitably connote the same meaning between Africans in the diaspora and those in continental Africa. However, transnational solidarity can be forged through cultural products that depict shared histories of resistance to colonialism and anti-Blackness. D. Soyini Madison contends that Blackness is a contested terrain of memory, identity, culture, and politics.⁶ Godfried Asante, Sachi Sekimoto, and Christopher Brown write, “Blackness is a space of transnational cultural construction, an ongoing formation with multiple axes/intersections in which historical narratives, local politics, and self-identifications are enunciated and debated.”⁷ In this line of thought,

Blackness is inherently a hybridized space of ongoing cultural formation and construction, as Paul Gilroy stipulates in *The Black Atlantic*. He notes that Black diasporic cultural and intellectual production is not specifically African, Caribbean, or British, but a mix of multiple ethnicities at once.⁸ In Gilroy's explication, Blackness transcends nation-state boundaries, tribal affiliations, and singular ethnic identity to open up spaces for self-emancipation, collective consciousness, and communal liberation.

Cogler's Afrofuturistic vision of Wakanda taps into Blackness as a transnational cultural construction and represents it as a global superpower, thereby rendering *Black Panther* as an Afrofuturist film because it "disrupts our understanding of Blackness by rethinking the past, present, and futures of the African diaspora."⁹ Mark Dery coined "Afrofuturism" in 1994 to explain speculative fictional storytelling that addresses African American concerns.¹⁰ Afrofuturist studies draw attention to science fiction themes and techniques in the works of Black authors and artists to project the future through Afrodiasporic experiences rooted in the displacement of people from Africa. Kodwo Eshun notes that Afrofuturism inserts Black culture into histories of modernity by assembling countermemories committed to humanizing history, the dead, and the forgotten.¹¹ Eshun makes the case that power currently operates predictively as much as retrospectively, and it produces and regulates the delivery of reliable futures. As such, time can be stretched and deployed to dispossess others by keeping them in the past (Africans) while harnessing the future becomes a tool of empowerment for (Western) others. Thus, *Black Panther* draws on the past to show the audience what constrains Black imaginations of emancipation and to offer possibilities for the future.

Although Afrofuturism is the focus of widespread academic attention and public acclaim, in alignment with postcolonial cultural critique, its selective engagement with the African continent has been scrutinized. Sofia Samatar notes that Afrofuturism's origin is rarely traced back to the African continent. In her critique of Ytasha L. Womack's *Afrofuturism*, Samatar contends that the experiences of African artists such as novelist Nnedi Okorafor and filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu are seamlessly integrated into the flow of Afrofuturism without an interrogation of how their relationship to the African continent is contextually different than, for example, Black Americans—thereby uniquely informing the field.¹² Central to Samatar's argument is that while Afrofuturism relies heavily on global Blackness and its orientation towards outer space, it also fails to account for Western and Eurocentric ideologies. On the other hand, *Black Panther* gets it right because Wakanda is not on Mars or Jupiter but is an African nation on Earth. Even so, critics have argued that the film lacks an engagement with African historical specificity and contemporary shifting material realities in ways that ultimately contest Western and Eurocentric domination. For instance, at the outset, the audience is told that Wakanda is a tribal nation. Paul Zeleza argues that "[t]he term 'tribe' is the 'N' word of colonial denigration for African societies."¹³ Chris Lowe writes that "[t]ribe promotes a myth of primitive African timelessness, [which obscures] history and change."¹⁴ In most Western countries, "tribe" implies homogeneity and primitive savagery, which does not capture the complexity of African histories and identities. Furthermore, Patrick Gathara argues that *Black Panther* projects a vision of Africa that is a creation of the white world, as are the literary, academic, cinematic, and political mechanisms used to give it mythology and credibility of truth.¹⁵ We align with these sentiments; we also believe *Black Panther* can be utilized to raise concerns that other products of the

Marvel Cinematic Universe are unable to accomplish. *Black Panther* does what Christina Sharpe describes as “wake work”—“an analytic that allows for the imagination of new ways to live and survive the afterlife of property.”¹⁶ It conjures a “wholly self-contained, autonomous African ecosystem” and thrusts it into our imaginations about Black futures.¹⁷

To make *Black Panther* an Afrofuturist emancipatory production useful to continental Africans, it is essential that we interrogate it in conjunction with postcolonial theory to provide a sustained critique of Western epistemologies that continually shape Black being and belonging. Postcolonial theory and Afrofuturism have similar theoretical goals regarding the critique of European modernity—which is to bring Africa and its subjects back into history.¹⁸ Importantly, postcolonial theory and Afrofuturism both gesture towards emancipation through the recuperation of Black diasporic consciousness as a key feature of global activism against anti-Blackness.¹⁹ Of prominence is how raising global Black consciousness has generated worldwide coalitional politics among Black intellectuals and activists leading to movements such as Pan-Africanism that are designed to challenge anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and anti-colonialist agendas of white supremacy.²⁰ However, a politics of Black consciousness in the diaspora context is a site of tension—wherein people of African descent negotiate their multiple affiliations, and most importantly, fight for their recognition by constantly navigating at the borderlands of racial discrimination, globalization, neocolonialism, neoliberalism, and their racial and national pride.²¹ Black consciousness as a site of contradictory tensions is evident in Wakanda in a way that allows for transnational conversations on Blackness and how it is anchored differently in specific places but ultimately emerges as a site of transformation and solidarity. Thus, transnational Blackness is a unifying theme in *Black Panther* that allows us to meaningfully rethink the past, present, and futures of the African diaspora and those on the continent.

Vibranium and the representation of transnational Blackness in Wakanda

Viewed through a postcolonial lens guided by Afrofuturism, vibranium emerges as a symbol of the cultural entanglements of power, ethics, and morality in the constitution of transnational Blackness as a global superpower. In Wakanda, vibranium—which powers the entire nation—eventually becomes the source of conflict over Wakanda’s national identity, global responsibility, and ethical obligation to share its powerful resources with—at a minimum—the rest of the Black world. The conflict around vibranium symbolizes the tensions that Clifford Geertz describes as saturating the politics of Black consciousness in a global landscape.²² Mainly, what role should Wakandans and vibranium play in a world shaped by colonial, necropolitical, and neoliberal violence that often targets Black peoples?

A glimpse of the tension surrounding the potential savior role of Wakanda is portrayed when T’Challa travels to rescue kidnapped African women (reminiscent of the 276 schoolgirls abducted in Nigeria in 2014)²³ including Nakia—a Wakandan spy in the kidnapping operation. As a spy, Nakia has witnessed the tremendous suffering of Others and how profit motives drive many forms of dehumanization. For her, Wakanda’s technological superiority can provide healing for the disadvantaged and dispossessed, and she suggests to T’Challa that vibranium should be used to connect with other Black people who need

the advancements and protections it affords. This scene sets up the tensions around the interventionist ethos that drives *Black Panther's* compelling narrative. It also preempts Wakanda as an imaginative space where audiences with scant knowledge about the U.S.A.'s racialized geopolitics confront the complexities and boundaries of representing Blackness on a transnational scale in ways that attend to global responsibility.

Like Nakia, Killmonger is also unable to comprehend T'Challa's decision not to intervene in global suffering. Both T'Challa and Killmonger are part of Wakanda's ruling lineage; one (T'Challa) has been enthroned as the rightful heir while the other (Killmonger) was knowingly abandoned by King T'Chaka (T'Challa's father), after he killed Killmonger's father (Prince N'jobu) in Oakland, CA. Killmonger seeks revenge for his father's death and claims his rightful place in Wakanda's monarchy. He believes vibranium should be weaponized to defend Black freedom in other parts of the world. But his desire to liberate Black people everywhere is at odds with the noninterventionist approach of King T'Challa and other Wakandan elites. For global audiences unable to fully grasp the material nuances of U.S. racial politics and its connections to the violent respectability politics of neoliberalism, Killmonger's preoccupation with violence reinforces, rather than challenges, the deep-seated stereotypes that maintain the false idea that African American men are obsessed with violence and are inherently dangerous.

Black Panther is a Marvel superhero film, and therefore, it is not surprising that it works within the bounds of the genre—heteropatriarchal violence is a given. Violence resurfaces as the necessary condition for liberation despite T'Challa's ambivalence towards it. Adam Serwer states that "*Black Panther* does not render a verdict that violence is an unacceptable tool of Black liberation—to the contrary, that is how Wakanda is liberated."²⁴ Towards the end of the movie, a civil war breaks out, and T'Challa fights, together with Okoye, the general leader of the Dora Milaje (who is bound to the throne but declines to support Killmonger) to reclaim Wakanda from Killmonger's virulent rule. White notes that Killmonger's use of violence fails because it is decoupled from a fully developed narrative of liberation; he is willing to kill his own people in the service of his ambition. After losing the climactic battle with T'Challa, Killmonger even refuses redemption, to which T'Challa states, "You want to see us become like the people you hate so much?" Killmonger replies, "I learn from my enemies," to which T'Challa profoundly responds, "You have become one of them." As viewers, we must ask: Who or what has Killmonger become?

Instead of reducing Killmonger to a stereotypical product of his "ghetto" background in Oakland, the film conveys that he is squarely a product of the U.S. military-industrial complex. For example, when Killmonger appears in Wakanda, Agent Everett K. Ross claims that he is not Wakandan but "one of us"—"us" meaning the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). On the one hand, Killmonger's desire to save his fellow Black people everywhere markedly resembles U.S. imperialist expansions using violence to bring "democracy" to the former colonies of Europe across the world. Killmonger's character rips open the contradictory logic that undergirds the savior complex of U.S. imperialist efforts to "rescue" the underdeveloped world while institutionalizing global financial policies that consistently stifle the economic independence of African nations. On the other hand, T'Challa's noninterventionist and benevolent ethos as a ruler is not outside the confines of contemporary late-capitalist neoliberal logics of inclusion and recognition. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, T'Challa is the embodiment of Black respectability

politics so well propagated by the global system of neoliberal capital, which ratifies recognition and inclusion as its tenets despite using violence to secure its “civilizing” mission. In one of *Black Panther’s* challenging moments, T’Challa collaborates with Agent Ross, who thinks Wakanda is a third-world country until he is subsequently secretly brought to Wakanda after sustaining spinal injuries. Ross’s inclusion and partnership, while celebratory as a form of coalition between “Africa” and the U.S.A., reproduce the violent frames of neoliberal respectability, which T’Challa’s character embodies. The history of the CIA in most of Africa includes the suppression of democratic movements and the opposition to racially progressive movements in the name of challenging communism.²⁵ Thus, from a postcolonial critical perspective, T’Challa’s embodiment as the nonviolent good global Black leader who can collaborate with settler-colonial governments such as the U.S.A. obscures the violent racialized geopolitical relationships that reinforce the current global neoliberal capitalist structure. In other words, what matters to T’Challa is to be respected by settler-colonial institutions such as the CIA as an equal partner in world governance rather than challenging the imperialistic impulse of that institution. Consequently, T’Challa’s approach to leadership not only functions (ironically) as a necessary opposition to Killmonger’s futile ambition, but also concretizes neoliberal respectability politics as an appropriate alternative—where radical politics is replaced by the mere recognition of racialized difference as inclusion.²⁶

Between the isolationist and neoliberal respectability politics of T’Challa, and the imperialist reading of Killmonger’s character, one might be inclined to agree that Killmonger’s vision is futile and unnecessarily violent. Conversely, via postcolonial theory and Afrofuturism, we believe he is a stark representation of the trauma of suppression that haunts the imaginaries of audiences from continental Africa. White argues that to give credit to Killmonger is to accept that he understands persecution.²⁷ Tabassum “Ruhi” Khan adds that, at least, Killmonger knows how persecution and marginalization stifle dreams and hopes for the future.²⁸ While we do not endorse the violence propagated by Killmonger, we do believe he is the “ghost” of the Middle Passage that importantly claims legitimacy in a Wakandan world marked by isolation and (neoliberal) individualism. This is significant because, at the root of Killmonger’s liberation politics, even though futile, is a desire for another world outside of whiteness.

Wakanda’s isolation from the rest of Africa strongly mirrors Western ethnocentrism rather than an African society. Kwame Gyekye maintains that African cultural worldviews include wholeness, community, and harmony with collective others beyond one’s immediate vicinity.²⁹ In most African philosophies on personhood, a person becomes human only amid others. That a society isolates itself while others suffer marks a Eurocentric ideal of an African society that functions to legitimate Eurocentrism and Westernization. Moreover, T’Challa’s family rule over Wakanda reflects the aftermath of colonization in many African countries, where access to political power is reserved for those with close ties to the political elite who have connections to Western corporations. This too legitimates neo-colonial nation-state and corporate practices that undermine African traditions on wholeness, connectivity, and harmony with collective others. As such, Wakanda’s isolation tactics raise questions about its liberatory potential against Eurocentrism and Westernization.

Coogler’s vision of Wakanda as a site of transnational Blackness, while transformative, is also limited because comic book heroes, villains, and thugs evoke two-dimensional

realities that undermine liberatory consciousness, which might otherwise rescue *Black Panther* from Western hegemony. Its production through the Walt Disney Corporation also raises questions about its liberatory potential. Disney has a history of profiting from a fantasized yet exploitive view of people of color (e.g., *The Lion King* (1994, 2019), *Tarzan* (1999), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Aladdin* (1992, 2019)). In an interview, Disney's former CEO Bob Iger said,

I am a big believer in that—whether you call it diversity or inclusion. But the bottom line is that doing so is good for commerce. The world is obviously, multi-colored, multi-natured, and multifaceted. The more we infuse that into our stories, the better off we are.³⁰

Iger's statement shows Disney's cooptation of radical racial narratives—a Pan-African aesthetic masks the appropriative tools of capitalist exploitation in the name of social justice. Khan notes that the fusion of African imagery with science fiction iconography exemplifies what bell hooks describes as “symbolic cannibalism”—wherein African heritage becomes a backdrop and gives an Afro-cosmopolitan sheen to Western arts and sciences without much detailed attention to African knowledge systems and traditions.³¹

Illustrating such practices in *Black Panther*, Zeleza points out that the adornments to represent tribal markings on several characters' bodies reinforce a homogenized “African authenticity” reminiscent of photographs in antiquated *National Geographic* magazines.³² This representation of “African authenticity” (which has been used to deny sexual citizenship to queer Africans) hardly translates into a contemporary understanding of African bodies. Furthermore, the melding of numerous histories and cultures of Africa into a digestible Pan-African visual aesthetic through clothes, languages, and architecture prevents viewers from critically and realistically engaging with the continent's complicated diversity. For instance, the melding of African languages such as Xhosa, Swahili, and Yoruba into one language does not allow viewers to explore how most Africans are multilingual, and as such, switch between different languages when verbally communicating with each other.

Along the same lines of thought, we ask: How does *Black Panther's* celebration of science erase vital African knowledge systems? African Indigenous conceptions of intelligence (found in music, word games, proverbs, folktales, recitation, riddles, songs), while looked down upon, emphasize practical, interpersonal, and social domains of functioning and are quite differentiated from the cognitive “academic” intelligence that dominates Western scientific constructs.³³ By prioritizing science, *Black Panther* effectively challenges the West's ideological construction of scientific and technological ineptitude within Black cultures. Yet, when this same storytelling device is considered in relation to African knowledge systems, it functions as a site of erasure that fails to consider how continental Africans experience this portrayal as an unproductive and inaccurate divorce between Indigenous and scientific knowledge. Bodies matter, especially how historically marginalized racialized bodies are represented as a site for working on and through transnational Blackness.

Conclusion: decolonial futures

In this essay, we examined *Black Panther* as a cinematic representation of transnational Blackness and African diasporic solidarity against neocolonial and neoliberal hegemony.

Black Panther centralizes “Africanness” in ways that enable viewers to “claim stories, epics, and songs of the people,” thereby using the tools of cultural production to “mold national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons.”³⁴ Steve Biko’s ideas of Black consciousness come into sharp view as a space where artistic expression intersects with political ideology. For Biko, “the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed,”³⁵ therefore, raising global Black consciousness is an essential aspect of the emancipation of Blacks everywhere. As such, there is no doubt that Wakanda is an Afrofuturistic space of transnational Blackness where audiences “work on” and “through” collective trauma. The mass psychic relief enables a collective feeling beyond the veil of what W. E. B. Du Bois described in 1903 when he asked, “How does it feel to be a problem?”³⁶

Despite *Black Panther*’s successful garnering of a transnational Black aesthetic and its counterhegemonic portrayal of Black bodies, a critical reading of Wakanda reflects what Nomusa Makhubu identifies as the many “uneasy open-ended questions about the place of Africa and Africans in the world.”³⁷ Indeed, representation matters. Yet, at whose expense if it generates indifference towards those who do not fit within the constructs of neoliberal respectability politics repackaged in Black and Brown bodies while using Pan-African solidarity as an aesthetic backdrop? We end this essay by stating that representations of African futures, Africans’ political and economic independence, and African diasporic solidarity should always involve and engage with the material realities of the African continent, which extend far beyond a decontextualized, aestheticized portrayal of “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.

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