

The future of the past: imagi(ni)ng black womanhood, Africana womanism and Afrofuturism in *Black Panther*

> **Rosemary Chikafa-Chipiro**

Department of English and Media Studies, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe

rosasharn48@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Since its release, *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) has proven to be a phenomenal black cultural text on so many levels. The film has revitalised discourses on Afrofuturism, owing to the fact that the black themes it raises reconfigure representations of black lives and history that have mainly been steeped in normative western categorisations. *Black Panther* has also proven to be phenomenal in its representation of black womanhood which, I would like to argue, engenders intimate convergences with the film's Afrofuturistic thrust. In other words, *Black Panther's* Afrofuturistic re-imagi(ni)ng of black womanhood is Africana womanist-centric. Black women from Africa and the African diaspora are presented as an imagined community – they have a shared history of imperial and patriarchal domination among other forms of othering. Their representation is a return to the source of sorts which recalls African women warriors who have been celebrated in the African past but seem to have lost the significance of their prowess over time but still have prospects in a re-invented Africa. Thus, in this paper I seek to make a theoretical case for Africana womanism in the Afrofuturistic context presented by *Black Panther*.

Keywords: *Black Panther*; representation; Africana womanism; Afrofuturism; black womanhood; Africa.

Introduction

While Afrofuturism presents black themes such as slavery, apartheid, othering, marginalisation in the African and the diaspora context, history, colonisation, postcolonisation and decolonisation as viewed and (re)conceptualised and (re)articulated through the dual lenses of technoculture and science fiction (Dery 1994), these themes also inform Africana womanism in large part. Africana womanism, like Afrofuturism, covers the same black themes in the African and diaspora context but with black women at the centre. Africana womanism as designed by Clenora Hudson-Weems (1998) is for women of African descent and their experiences but is not only concerned about black women but about the wholeness of black peoples; that is, race, class and sex. At the core of Africana womanism's eighteen characteristics of an Africana woman are concerns for self-articulation, social commitment, communal empowerment and interpersonal connection (Tounsel 2015). Africana womanism is also a reclamation theoretical perspective that seeks to reclaim black women's identities and subjectivities in the face of western feminist hegemonies (hooks 1992; Hudson-Weems 1993). From an Africana womanist perspective, black men and women from Africa and the African diaspora are united by their shared history and their gender relations are largely informed by a spirit of unity in struggle.

Afrofuturism is also understood to be an extension of the historical recovery projects that the black Atlantic intellectuals have engaged in for well over 200 years (Yaszek 2009:47). Afrofuturism, as defined by Mark Dery (1994) and Womack (2013) among other Afrofuturist scholars, refers to cultures of resistance that are born out of reflections on the not so glorious African past and the consequent re-imaginings of African futures – in Africa and the African diaspora. Afrofuturism is understood as an artistic aesthetic and framework for critical theory that employs 'science-fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity and magic realism with non-western beliefs' (Womack 2013:9). At the heart of these components is Afrofuturism's intersection of imagination, technology, the future and liberation (Womack 2013:9). Scholars including Womack (2013), Dery (1994), Eshun (2003), and Dean and Andrews (2016) among others also speak to an understanding of Afrofuturism as a resistance movement that employs the imagination in inverting conventional thinking, destabilising previous analysis of blackness and creating an African space in the future.

Of Afrofuturist and Africana womanist interest in *Black Panther* is the way that the film engages gender roles and the implications this may have on theorising on gender and the place of black womanhood in the African futures discourse. To engage this aspect, the paper utilises Africana womanism and Afrofuturism as critical frames of engagement. I posit that the convergences between Afrofuturism and Africana womanism need to be engaged further as a way of re-discoursing and re-theorising the black woman experience. Thus, placing Africana womanism in dialogue with

Afrofuturism in *Black Panther* offers a nuanced angle from which to engage these intersections which are also apparent in the wide-reaching ‘affective cords (subjective experience) and social struggles (collective historicity)’, (de B’beri 2011), represented by narrative imaginations of race, rights and gender in global discourses. In essence, the interconnections between Africana womanism and Afrofuturism in *Black Panther* speak to much more than the African and African diaspora interface but to other political discourses including postcolonial subjectivity and decolonisation.

The essence of this paper lies in the significance of *Black Panther* itself. The film has come in the wake of discourses on representations of blackness that more often than not are continuously steeped in normative western categorisations. When asked on how the response to *Black Panther* has been framed around tensions in the diaspora, such as the representation of Africa, the role of “real” Africans versus African American fantasies, the tension and/or limits of black nationalism and pan-Africanism, Reynaldo Anderson states that although there is a lot of misinformation going round among interested parties, blacks have interests that have to be attended to and they should instead work against the educational, historical, and the political-economic designs of the white Atlantic and their allies who instilled in Africans of the diaspora and Africans on the continent a slave mentality and colonised mentality respectively (The Black Scholar 2018 [sp]). In that regard, there is substantial black scholarship that has uplifted works on counter-hegemonic expressions of racial identity especially those that re-imagine racial progress and racial identities in new and provocative ways as represented in science fiction and comics among a number of futuristic texts (Nama 2009; White 2018; Ringer 2016).

However, another scholar, Michelle M Wright (2013) poses that tensions in the diaspora are manifest in black scholarship where diaspora studies reveal ‘the limits of authentic heteronormativity in African diaspora discourse’. By heteronormativity is meant ‘a set of assumptions on the “natural” formations of communities as well as how key terms such as resistance and oppression are defined and measured’ (Wright 2013: 7). She further postulates that heteronormativity justifies narrations of diaspora wholly through men by assumptions that heterosexual male bodies are active agents who create history while heterosexual female bodies are passive objects that simply lives it (Wright 2013:7). Wright makes the point that dominant African diasporic discourse interpellates black subjects differently and more so, through gender and sexuality (Wright 2013:10). This is of high interest to this study as *Black Panther* posits new dimensions from which to speak to the expression of heteronormativity in general (as referenced above), heteronormativity in a gendered sense, and the question of authenticity.

Mark Dery (1994:180) opines that the notion of Afrofuturism raises a troubling antimony and asks whether a community whose past has been deliberately erased and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by searches for a legible trace of its history can imagine possible futures. This is a question that *Black Panther*, as an Afrofuturistic work of art, seems to answer. What is apparent in Afrofuturistic works is that in setting out on a reclamation project, they do more than combat the erasure of black subjects from western history, they also institute the discourse of authenticity on the black subject's experiences and the way those experiences embody the dislocation felt by many modern peoples (Yaszek 2006). Moreover, as intimated by Dean and Andrews (2016) the methods and ideologies of Afrofuturism are situated in diverse bodies of cultural knowledge including mysticism, technology, new age spirituality, human and posthuman identity, and the futurity of race, sexuality and gender roles. I am in agreement with Eshun's (2003:289) view that capital continues to function through the dissimulation of the imperial archive and that in the contemporary moment power also functions through the envisioning, management and delivery of reliable futures as posited in *Black Panther*.

In this vein, the study posits that there are convergences between Africana womanism and Afrofuturism in *Black Panther* and these speak to the African and African diaspora interface, postcolonial subjectivity and decolonisation. The representations of women in *Black Panther* is a return to the source of sorts which recalls African women warriors who have been celebrated in the African past but seem to have lost the significance of their prowess over time but still have prospects in a re-invented Africa. Thus, in this paper I seek to make a theoretical case for Africana womanism in the Afrofuturistic context presented by *Black Panther*.

Imagining black womanhood in *Black Panther*

The first point of departure that this study seeks to take in the critique of imaginations of black womanhood is that *Black Panther*'s Afrofuturistic re-imagining of black womanhood is Africana womanist-centric. Black womanist scholarship has been at pains to call for and upend texts that speak to the importance of black women's subjectivities in diverse works of art including comics. This range of scholarship has since celebrated the role of black women in science fiction from Octavia Butler's works to the roles of female heroes such as Storm in the *X-Men*. These works have attempted to subvert general heteronormative narratives that have limited the experiences of black womanhood at the margins of claims to black authenticity as previously intimated through reference to Wright's work (Wright 2013). In spite of these attempts most of

the narratives have remained confined to the gendered heteronormative hierarchy that displaces black women from central and significant roles outside of the superimposition of black males.

Black Panther film reviews and scholarship has paid homage to how the film has distinguished itself in its representations of not only blackness but black womanhood (Hardawa 2018; Pulliam-Moore 2018; Faithful 2018; Anyabwile 2018). These critics argue that *Black Panther* has engendered a new discourse in representations of black men and women thereby presenting the black experience itself as multifaceted, complex, and subjective in such a way as to permit an innumerable variety of forms that ultimately reflects that the black experience is not a singular, monolithic entity (Faithful 2018:12). Critics have highlighted both the negative and positive aspects of the film's representations of women with the positive mostly outweighing the negative.

Following the criticisms on *Black Panther's* presentation of women, I argue that the film has made significant progress in re-imagining and re-situating black womanhood within and even outside the general heteronormative hierarchy. Aside from being Africana womanist, *Black Panther* is arguably a postcolonial, Afrocentric and de-colonial reinstitution of a pre-colonial African past undertaken by means of traversing a ubiquitous African colonial past and through a de-colonial African present and imagined future in the face of modernity. Hence, my utilisation of the phrase 'the future of the past' in the text of the title. By looking to the past through Afrofuturism, the film institutes a "sankofa" moment of returning to the source in order to chart a viable future. The film narrative evokes myth as it looks to Africa as the origin and authentic source of African diasporic identity through the rise of a mystical Wakanda from an Africa that was hit by a meteorite made of vibranium and the subsequent unity of the four tribes that eventually became Wakanda. The initial agency towards the protection of Wakanda against the outside world from N'Jobu's betrayal is heralded by the preceding of King T'Chaka's entry into N'Jobu's house by the two "Grace Jones" looking Dora Milajes. This heralds the centrality of black womanhood in the power dynamics of Wakanda that runs through the film.

From an Africana womanist perspective, black and/or Africana gender roles are complementary. Africana womanism appeals to the black male-female unity in struggle that was inculcated by black subjection to slavery and colonialism under white imperial domination. The aspects of male compatibility and being in concert with male in struggle are contentious in the way they raise debates on whether *Black Panther* really succeeds in situating black womanhood outside the confines of gendered heteronormativity. First and foremost, male compatibility assumes heterosexual relations as the norm in patriarchal Africana cultures. This necessarily places limits on the

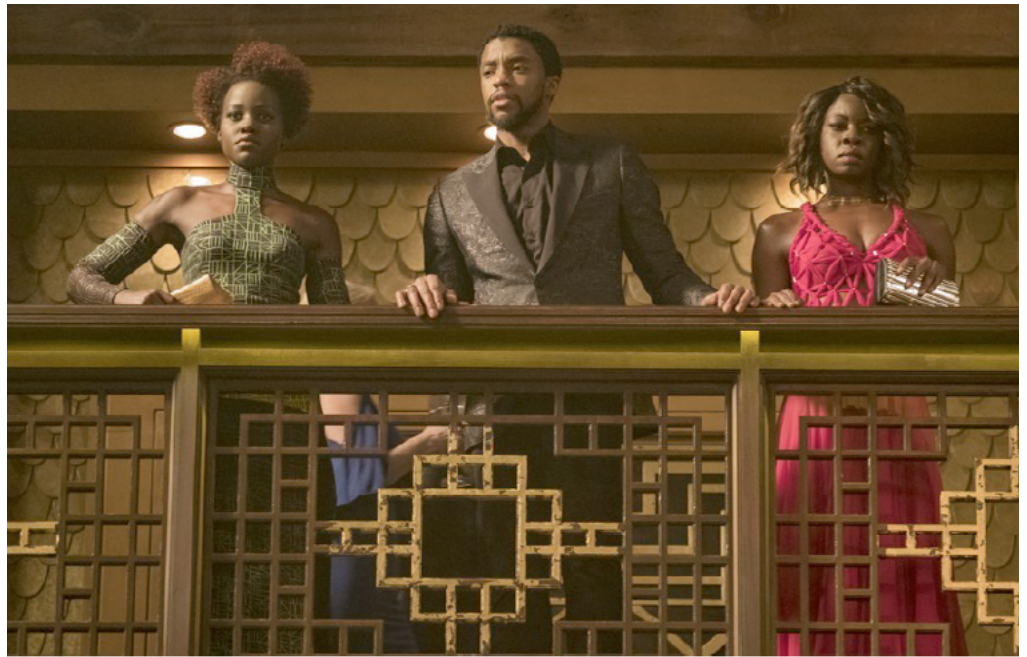


FIGURE N° 1



Okoye (Danai Gurira) and Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o) with T'Challa (Chadwick Bosman) ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

extent to which Africana women can resist patriarchal domination although the women in *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018), seem to have some degree of individual independence and autonomy in decision making even as they answer to their men. Hence, Nakia can stubbornly decide not to be the Queen and continue to be a spy and work on saving non-Wakandan victims of war and T'Challa finally adopts her idea of helping oppressed peoples outside Wakanda. In this regard, it may be argued that Africana womanism champions negotiation and harmonious relations between black men and women as opposed to western feminism's overt resistances to patriarchy, hence the precedence of race over sex in Africana womanism.

Africana womanism as a theoretical standpoint solely coined for women of African descent and grounded in African culture (Hudson-Weems 1993:24) places black women at the centre of agency from family to national politics. The contention with this theoretical positioning of black women is that they may play significant and immutable roles but they do not rule. Africana womanism has been criticised for its complacency to patriarchal domination through the inclusion of black men which is ascribed to years of phallogocentric socialisation (Ogundipe-Lesley 1994). Thus, in *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) the Dora Milaje are an all-woman army in the service of Wakanda

which is led by a patriarchal monarchy. The centrality of the women in the film is apparent in the way they occupy spaces; they dominate the *mise-en-scène* and are present at every significant event. From the Dora Milaje, who are led by Okoye, to the women in the familial monarchy, the patriarch's survival is reliant on the resilience of its women. When King T'Chaka is murdered, it is Okoye, the Queen mother Ramonda, the prince's sister Shuri and the prince's fiancé Nakia who support and somewhat propel prince T'Challa to the throne. When the throne is usurped by Erik Killmonger at the assumed death of T'Challa and the consequent threat to Wakanda's sovereignty, it is their responsibility to protect and restore Wakanda's interests. Thus, Okoye remains to safeguard Wakanda out of loyalty to the throne while Nakia takes responsibility for the future restoration of Wakanda by plucking the healing herb that will resuscitate the dying Prince T'Challa. Meanwhile, Shuri continues her innovative role of driving Wakanda's technology as she makes sure to escape with the kimoyo beads while the Queen mother continues with her maternal duty as she escapes with her children to seek exile and help from King M'Baku of Jabari.

Elsewhere, I have argued that Africana womanism is multi-dimensional and flexible in focus because it not only references the black woman's experience but inherently assumes other theoretical formulations such as Afrocentrism, postcolonial theory, and Afrofuturism in the context of the current paper, as it seeks to speak to the whole black experience (Chikafa 2017:29). From the analysis above, this makes an Africana womanist critique of patriarchy more complex than it may seem at the outset. An example of this complexity is represented in Makgato, Chaka and Mandende's (2018) institution of an Africana womanist's resistance to patriarchy which in some instances contradicts the characteristics of the protagonist's embodiment of Africana womanist characteristics because her resistance is individualistic and runs contrary to aspects of family centredness. The women's centrality in the politics of Wakanda places more precedence on the commitment to the wholeness of Wakanda peoples and the state's sovereignty than to the women's individual subjectivities. Therefore, the women's roles privilege the communal over the individual. Anyabwile (2018), using Alice Walker's womanism opines that womanism transcends the limitations of patriarchal hegemonies because of contextual specificities. He echoes Alice Walker (1983) and contends that through Walker's sensibilities to the experiences of the American South there was such a thing as acting "womanish" by pushing socially accepted boundaries while appreciating women's culture, women's sensibilities and at the same time being committed to the survival of whole peoples. Although Hudson-Weems (1993) dissociates her Africana womanism from Walker's womanism, the relationship here is apparent.



FIGURE **Nº 2**



Shuri (Letitia Wright), Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o), Ramonda (Angela Bassett), and Everett K Ross (Martin Freeman) ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

From an Afrofuturist perspective, it is essential that black men and women as subjects of colonial history should maintain harmonious relations so as to enable the realisation of sustainable futures for Africa. Even as the patriarchy is dominant, there is room for the women to question patriarchal decisions and act autonomously as illustrated by Nakia's support for Wakanda's outside engagement. The patriarchal set up renders the women subordinate but their representation awards them independence and strength of character that pits them as equal to their male counterparts. Some critics have argued that Wakanda is patrilineal and not patriarchal in a pejorative sense (Anyabwile 2018:4). In this kind of social structure, Shuri and Nakia could possibly lay claim to the throne but do not do so because 'the culture values the role of men in society'. In what George Faithful (2018:3) refers to as the redemption of blackness in *Black Panther* the male and female characters have their own narratives, trials, flaws, conflicts, and opportunities for growth. Faithful rightly opines that Okoye prevails against her enemies in combat because of her superior situational awareness, reflexes, and expertise rather than because of her brute strength which is, in fact, an expression of her mental precision (2018:6). In contrast, Faithful characterises T'Challa as a complex leader who is bold in battle, measured in his words, and cautious in his foreign policy and yet prone to take significant personal risks in covert action (2018:4). Thus, the men and women of Wakanda are equal, but different (Anyabwile 2018).

In essence, the black women of *Black Panther* are an ensemble that is not new to the African narrative. In the context of the film, they are drawn from a diverse African and African diaspora pool of black actresses that may be termed 'sisters of the screen' to borrow from Beti Ellerson's (2000) nomenclature for black women across Africa and the diaspora working in film. The central role that the women play in the socio-political and economic welfare of Wakanda is imitative of the scholarly and historical claims of African women's autonomy in the continent that is argued for by scholars such as Ife Amadiume (1987), Zulu Sofola (1998) and Ousmane Sembene's representations of their pivotal role in Africa's resistance to colonialism in his films *Emitai* (Sembene 1971) and *Ceddo* (Sembene 1977).

The women of *Black Panther* essentially represent an embodiment of the Africana womanist eighteen characteristics of an Africana woman and these are spread across their different roles and personalities. Hudson-Weems identifies the following characteristics of an Africana womanist: '(1) a self namer and (2) a self-definer, (3) family centred, (4) genuine in sisterhood, (5) strong, (6) in concert with male in struggle, (7) whole, (8) authentic, (9) a flexible role-player, (10) respected, (11) recognized, (12) spiritual, (13) male compatible, (14) respectful of elders, (15) adaptable, (16) ambitious, (17) mothering and (18) nurturing' (Hudson-Weems 1998:1814-1815).

Black Panther (Coogler 2018) women's embodiment of these characteristics is phenomenal and has been presented as such by many critics. Anyabwile (2018) and Faithful (2018) respectively place the women in name categories to reflect on their embodiment of these characteristics. Anyabwile refers to Nakia as 'the down black woman' because she gives up the possible comforts of the Kingdom as its queen for the survival and wholeness of peoples through the saving of oppressed women in the Chibok forest (2018:1). Faithful, on the other hand, refers to Nakia as 'the spy'. These categories for Nakia position her as an embodiment of Africana womanist ethos, as the down woman she has the subjectivity to name and define her experience and be adaptable as the circumstances demand. As a spy, she has a more independent and yet communal role to play, albeit independently, alongside her male counterpart in a way that makes her a flexible role player and an ambitious woman. Only the film subtly fulfils her ambition by way of the compromise that T'Challa finally takes as he gives in to Nakia's opinion that Wakanda should engage the world outside Wakanda and offer assistance where its might will benefit many peoples.

Okoye is referred to as 'the loyal black woman' by Anyabwile (2018:2) while Faithful refers to her as 'the warrior'. These two readings of Okoye are diametrically opposed in the sense that Anyabwile's positions her in the normative role of womanhood in the African setup. Thus, as an Africana woman, she is both a loyal soldier and a beautiful



FIGURE N° 3



T'Challa (Chadwick Bosman) with Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o), Okoye (Danai Gurira) and Ayo (Florence Kasumba) ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

woman who can be a suitable spouse. There is no overt militancy in such an embodiment as opposed to how as a warrior she can act independently, outside the idiosyncrasies of normative womanhood. In this regard, Africana womanist characteristics appear to be limiting on the overt expression of the black woman experience outside of the normative everyday interactions of African womanhood. Being a self-namer, self-definer, and flexible role player seems to be empowering while being family centred, mothering or nurturing seems to place boundaries on the extent to which women can be powerful and liberated. This is also apparent in how the two critics perceive of Ramonda as 'the motherly black woman' (Anyabwile 2018:3) and 'the conscience of a nation' who is consistently bound by tradition, honour and family (Faithful 2018:7).

Of all the women in *Black Panther*, Shuri presents the most powerful representation of an Africana woman. She is a genius and there is some consensus to the fact that she is indeed a genius. Shuri embodies other womanly characteristics in the Africana womanist sense but what really defines her is her pivotal role as the technocrat of Wakanda. She is the scientist, engineer, and technological inventor and strategist at the centre of Wakanda's techno-political genius. Her role as the woman who presents gadgets to the protagonist is in place in the Africana womanist frame of reference, but is a significant subversion of Hollywood representational practice where it is solely males who assist each other at that level. That and the power of the Dora Milajes are a classic win for black women in *Black Panther*.



FIGURE N° 4



Shuri (Letitia Wright) sitting in the lab ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

The Intersection of Africana Womanism and Afrofuturism in *Black Panther*

At the heart of Africana womanism and Afrofuturism is the representation of black people as an imagined community (Anderson 1983). Beyond any nationalistic premises for identification, black people, represented in both theoretical postulations, are imagined through a shared history of imperial domination; and patriarchal domination for black women, among other forms of othering. These forms of othering are manifested through subjective experience and social struggles. In addition, as intimated earlier, the Afrofuturist-Africana womanist orientation of *Black Panther* resonates with broader discourses in the Africanist canon including postcolonial and decolonial subjectivities. Taking this as my point of departure in interrogating the intersection of Africana womanism and Afrofuturism in *Black Panther* I argue that these theoretical underpinnings are more or less two sides of the same coin and can be complementary, not only in the Africanist canon but in the expression of black futures.

Africana womanism and Afrofuturism are both multi-dimensional and flexible in focus. Both theoretical postulations assume the postcolonial and Afrocentric project which opens them up to a broader political focus. In their signaling the future of the past, they represent a reclaiming and re-signaling of African cultures and history as means of black liberation and innovation. Both theoretical postulations are thus implicit within the post-colonial discourse of the west and the rest of us, hegemony and resistance, the western subject and the other (Spivak 1988; Bhabha 1994; Said 1978) as well as the Afrocentric centralisation of Africa and its peoples. Thus, Afrofuturism and Africana womanism in *Black Panther* mediate “brave black worlds” through the intersection of race, science, speculative fiction, black culture, African tradition and technology which speaks to ideological expression of racial identity and black futurism (Nama 2009:135).

In an Afrofuturistic reconfiguration of history, Africa is critically and creatively renamed Wakanda. Naming is as central to Afrofuturism’s reclamation of history as it is to Africana womanism’s concept of nommo, which expresses the power of naming and self-definition to establish the concreteness of experience (Hudson-Weems 1993). Naming is potent in the Afrofuturist narrative of *Black Panther* because it gives new meaning to the history of Africa. The origin story of Wakanda is realistic as it presents that Wakanda was not a utopia as it was made up of five constantly warring tribes four of which were later reunited under the first Wakanda king while the Jabari tribe chose to isolate themselves in the mountains. Internal conflict in Wakanda is visible even through N’jobu who betrays Wakanda’s secret to Klaw. The narrative of N’jobu’s betrayal is significant in the way it inverts the African and African diaspora historical narrative that has often identified Africans in Africa as having betrayed their clansmen during the transatlantic slave trade for material gain. In *Black Panther*, the conflict culminates from divergent political and economic interests whereby Wakanda’s future is at stake if it opens its doors for international interference. N’jobu’s mission in America thereby breeds the African diasporic identity through the birth of a son Erik Killmonger, a birth that will problematise African identity and endanger Wakanda’s autonomy.

The significance of naming is also shown in the film where people are asked “*ungubani*” (“who are you?”). In the face of possible defeat in combat with M’Baku T’Challa regains his strength and defeats his opponent when his mother shouts, “show him who you are”. The same agency that nommo brings to Afrofuturism in the film is signaled in the women’s sense of agency as self-namers and self-definers. Okoye, Nakia and Shuri are shown to be independent and to have causative agency as self-namers and self-definers. They are comfortable in their roles, identities and responsibilities. Okoye as the leader of the Dora Milaje defines her loyalty to the throne and asserts that she is willing to stay attached to the throne even at the expense of her loved ones the most glaring of which is her affirmation to her husband that she would even kill him

for Wakanda. Her experience necessitates that she put her people first before her personal desires. Okoye's loyalty pays off as it strategically positions her for the final fight for the throne on T'Challa's return.

The significance of naming to the narrative of *Black Panther* can be understood in Kwodo Eshun's argument that assembling counter-memories that contest the colonial archive situates the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity (Eshun 2003:288). Africana womanism as an anti-western feminist articulation of the black woman's race, class, and sex experience is a bold confrontation of the trauma of imperial, racial, and patriarchal domination which makes room for the re-inscription of black women's past, present and future. Even the Killmonger subplot in the film addresses the trauma that continues to shape the contemporary era and allows for an Afrofuturistic re-orientation.

On discovering that his father murdered his brother N'jobu, T'Challa seeks to make reparations by admitting Killmonger into his legitimate home and accepting his challenge to the throne, even at his own peril. Aside from his legitimacy in Wakanda, Killmonger also represents the threat of colonial subjugation through carrying on relations with western imperialism whose characteristics he imbibes in his thirst for power and vengeance against Wakanda. Nonetheless, even when Killmonger is defeated after the long, drawn out battle at T'Challa's return, T'Challa offers to reconcile with Killmonger who remains obstinate and asks to be buried in the ocean with his ancestors who jumped from ships, 'cause they knew death was better than bondage'. Thus, to concur with Eshun's argument, when it comes to Afrofuturist themes it is never a matter of forgetting what it took so long to remember, rather, the vigilance that is necessary to indict imperial modernity must be extended into the field of the future (Eshun 2003: 289). In essence what *Black Panther* as an Afrofuturistic narrative has done is to re-orient black history and 'the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective' (Eshun 2003:289). Thus, the Afrofuturistic thrust of *Black Panther* significantly shifts knowledge and power dynamics and more importantly now that power operates predictively as much as retrospectively. Through and beyond the Killmonger sub-plot and his subsequent death, *Black Panther* predictively reconfigures the whole colonial and modern narrative to define a progressive future.

The envisioning, management and delivery of a reliable future in *Black Panther* does not happen in isolation of Africa's women who are also key players in the present and future. The Africana womanist representation of black womanhood in *Black Panther* is significant because it is removed from western feminism. Unlike western feminism, Africana womanism gives precedence to race before class and gender (Hudson-Weems 1998). Western feminism has ostensibly been associated with middle class

white women and their search for equality with their male counterparts thereby giving precedence to gender and sexuality over other subjectivities. By giving precedence to race and class, Africana womanism specifically prioritises black women's identities and subjectivities in an arguably culturally relative way. The theoretical postulation is thus able to retrospectively and predictively reposition black gender relations. More so, because Africana womanism is not disengaged from African everyday experiences in social spheres including the family, the community and religion, and allows for a smooth transition and/ or analogy between the past and the present. It positions the past gender relations in dialogue with present and speculative future relations.

The film presents a subversion of racial and gender stereotypes that would divide black men and women and put to question the authenticity of black male-female relations. It has been argued that the power of women in African societies is a major component of Afrofuturism (Hardawa 2018). Black women are represented as crucial to organic African existence on a spiritual plane. By organic African existence is meant the biological, physical, and spiritual cosmological makeup. Not only are the women at the centre of Wakanda's technological life through Shuri's innovations but they are also the essence of Wakanda's tangible and intangible cosmological existence. The mythology of Wakanda locates black women at the heart of black spirituality. In the African cosmos, spirituality and womanhood are often linked and the woman as mother is considered a giver of life (Chikafa 2017:176). The Africana woman is spiritual and the African woman is, 'the highest incarnation of wisdom; the future and the fate of the community depend decidedly on her' (Bujo 1998:124). As Bujo (1998:125) further argues, the African woman's role involves promoting and developing life in a variety of its forms and this is what we see in *Black Panther's* women. Like Bujo's genealogy of African women and spirituality shows, the women in *Black Panther* have a special relationship with the invisible world, a relationship that is crafted through the process of giving birth, which is linked to ancestors and God as the original source of life (Bujo 1998:125).

Furthermore, spirituality as an Afrofuturistic theme in *Black Panther* is given more import in its expression through the women. The mythical black panther of the Wakanda origin story is a goddess – a woman spiritual being that provides guidance to the King(s) of Wakanda. Her presence throughout the film is ubiquitous – she is embodied in the panthers that prowl alongside former kings in the ancestral plains; in panther iconography which marks T'Challa's gear, in Shuri's hand blasters; and at the mouth of a mountaintop cave overlooking Wakanda. Thus, spirituality as a theme in both Africana womanism and Afrofuturism pushes the *Black Panther* narrative forward with women at the centre. In the film, Ramonda, Shuri and Nakia are at the centre of T'Challa's re-birth. Ramonda as the queen mother implores the ancestors on behalf of T'Challa. M'Baku has preserved T'Challa between life and death by keeping him



FIGURE **Nº 5**



T'Challa (Chadwick Bosman) with Ramonda (Angela Bassett) ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

buried in the snow and it is the heart-shaped herb that Nakia saves from death at Killmonger's hand that will revive T'Challa. Therefore, the three women preside over T'Challa's death and re-birth ritual as they chant to the ancestors and whisper 'wake up T'Challa'. This is a scene that has been replayed a few times before in the film at the challenge for the throne ceremonies and at T'Challa's and Killmonger's respective anointing's as Kings of Wakanda. The women, although not at the centre of the masculinist combat for the throne, are at the helm of the rituals and ceremonies in the presence of the men. Suffice to also point out that Ramonda, Shuri and Nakia negotiate peace with M'Baku's Jabari tribe, the fifth Wakandan tribe that had chosen to isolate itself in the mountains and are thereby able to save Wakanda in tri^gunity.

The quasi death and re-birth rituals in the film are also symbolic Afrofuturist bridges between the past and the present that necessarily informs an enlightened and viable future. Through the rituals, not only a repository relationship with the past is maintained, atonement for past wrongs is also achieved. This is particularly revealed in T'Challa's second death-re-birth scene as he is transported to the land of his ancestors. There he confronts the past through dialogue with his father and out rightly tells him that it



FIGURE N° 6



Shuri (Letitia Wright) with T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) in the lab ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

was wrong for Wakanda to turn away from the rest of the world and for his father to abandon young Killmonger. T'Challa refuses to die so that he can go back and confront “the truth” that his father “chose to omit” in the form of Killmonger who has also turned into a monster of Wakanda’s making. T'Challa makes reparations thereof by opening up Wakanda to the rest of the world. Wakanda would open its doors to the world but on its own terms. The future is diplomatically and technologically inverted with the advent of Wakanda into the international terrain of modern capital at the United Nations. Moreover, T'Challa establishes a community center right at the building where N'Jobu was killed and where Erik Killmonger was abandoned. The film ends with the prospect of nurturing a new generation of African and African diasporic pan-African relations; and of course, the technologically innovative centre will be run by Wakanda’s versatile women Shuri and Nakia.

Africana womanism and Afrofuturism ostensibly lend *Black Panther* some degree of success in the way that the two paradigms work towards a redemption of blackness. The film achieves this by pushing the boundaries between the unreality of the superhero narrative and the socio-cultural realities of many viewers as it invites them to rethink the kinds of stories they could tell (Faithful 2018). The film has told the story of Wakanda in a way that argues that a community whose past has been deliberately erased and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by searches for a legible trace of its history can imagine possible futures. Furthermore, *Black Panther's* box office

success is another representation of the redemption of blackness. Although it poses a complex of meanings for decolonisation and Africanisation even in its socioeconomic implications, it is a giant step towards diversity in Hollywood representations (Waters & Barton 2018).

Conclusion

Black Panther has done considerably well in shifting the conversation on Africa and futurity by centering black womanhood. Besides the crucial African and Diaspora identities interface that the Africa and futures discourse should make, there should be commitment to the wholeness of black peoples which the film *Black Panther* has relatively fulfilled in traversing the Afrofuturistic and Africana womanist canon. Afrofuturistic and Africana womanist thought has proven to be versatile in engaging the imperial archive in a materialistic and philosophical perspective that gives precedence to pertinent postcolonial and decolonial subjectivities that would of necessity position African substance in speculative futures. In essence, there is some improvement on the superimposition of the heteronormative narrative in *Black Panther*. What is of substantial significance in *Black Panther* and its engagement of Afrofuturism and Africana womanism is the political mission behind the theoretical postulations. The historical recovery project behind Afrofuturism in *Black Panther* engages the Nietzschean 'founding conditions of modernity' that are crucial to the African and diasporic past, present and future (Gilroy 1993:178; Yaszek 2006:47). More so given that in representing the future *Black Panther* has tapped into big science, big business and global media thereby strategically positioning Africa within mainstream discourses of power and knowledge production in the futures industry (Eshun 2003; Yaszek 2006:47).

REFERENCES

Amadiume, I. 1987. *Male daughters, female husbands*. London: Zed Books.

Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

Anyabwile, T. 2018. *The front porch*. [O]. Available: <https://thefrontporch.org/2008/02/the-black-panther-as-afrofuturist-womanist-vision/>. Accessed: 2 February 2019.

Bhabha, HK. 1988. The commitment to theory. *New Formations* 5:5-23.

- Bujo, B. 1998. *The ethical dimension of community: the African model and the dialogue between North and South*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa.
- Makgato, M, Chaka, C, & Mandende, I. 2018. Theorising an Africana womanist's resistance to patriarchy in Monyaise's *Bokosi Kupe*. *Journal of Black Studies* 49(4):330-348.
- Chikafa, R. 2017. *Representations of black womanhood in Tyler Perry's and Ousmane Sembene's films*. PhD Thesis. Harare: University of Zimbabwe.
- Coogler, R (dir). 2018. *Black Panther*. [Film]. Marvel Studios.
- Dean, T & Andrews, DP. 2016. Introduction: Afrofuturism in Black theology – race, gender, sexuality, and the state of Black religion in the *Black metropolis*. *Black Theology* 14(1):2-5.
- Dery, M. 1994. Black to the future: interviews with Samuel R Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose, in *Flame wars: the discourse of cyberculture*, edited by M Dery. Durham and London: Duke University Press:179–222.
- de B'beri, E. 2011. Africanity in Black cinema: A conjunctural ground for new expressions of identity, in *Africa, cultural studies and difference*, edited by K Tomaselli & HK Wright. London and New York: Routledge:15-37.
- Ellerson, B. 2012. *Sisters of the screen: women of Africa on film, video and television*. Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press.
- Eshun, K. 2003. Further considerations on Afrofuturism. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3(2):287-302.
- Faithful, G. 2018. Dark of the world, shine on us: the redemption of Blackness in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*. *Religions* 9(304):1-15.
- Gilroy, P. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hardawa, D. 2018. *Engadget*. [O]. Available: <https://www.engadget.com/2018/02/15/black-panther-review/>. Accessed: 6 February 2019.
- hooks, b. 1992. *Black looks: race and representation*. Boston: South End Press.
- Hua, A. 2013. Black diaspora feminism and writing: memories, storytelling and the narrative word as sites of resistance. *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 6(3):30-42.

- Hudson-Weems, C. 1993. *Africana womanism: reclaiming ourselves*. Troy, Mich.: Bedford.
- Hudson-Weems, C. 1998. Africana womanism: A historical, global perspective for women of African descent, in *Call and response: the Riverside anthology of the African American literary tradition*, edited by PL Hill, et al. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin: 1812-1815.
- Nama, A. 2009. Brave Black Worlds: Black superheroes as science fiction ciphers. *African Identities* 7(2): 133-144.
- Pulliam-Moore, C. 2018. *Gizmodo*. [O]. Available: <https://109.gizmodo.com/black-women-are-black-panther's-mightiest-heroes-182320>. Accessed: 6 February 2019.
- Ringer, CD. 2016. Afrofuturism and the DNA of biopolitics in the Black public sphere. *Black Theology* 14(1):53-68.
- Said, E. 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge.
- Sembene, O. (dir). 1971. *Emitai*. [Film]. Films Domireew.
- Sembene, O. (dir). 1977. *Ceddo*. [Film]. Films Domireew.
- Sofola, Z. 1998. Feminism and African womanhood, in *Sisterhood: Feminisms and power: from Africa to the diaspora*, edited by O Nnaemeka. Trenton: Africa World Press:51-64.
- Spivak, GC. 1988. Can the subaltern speak?, in *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, edited by C Nelson & L Grossberg. London: Macmillan:22-28.
- The Black Scholar. 2018. [O]. Available: <http://www.theblackscholar.org/on-black-panther-afrofuturism-and-astroblackness-a-conversation-with-reynaldo-anderson/>. Accessed: 10 August 2018.
- Turman, A. 2015. An Afrofuturist womanist Affair: a book review of the sexy part of the Bible by Kola Boof. *Penumbra*, Issue 2.
- Tounsel, TN. 2015. *The Black woman that media built: Content creation, interpretation, and the making of the Black female self*. DPhil Thesis. Michigan: University of Michigan.
- Waters, C & Barton, G. 2018. *Vox*. [O]. Available: <https://www.vox.com/videos/2018/2/16/17020276/black-panther-box-office-marvel-studios-hollywood-diversity>. Accessed: 2 February 2019.

White, RT. 2018. I dream a world: *Black Panther* and the re-making of Blackness. *New Political Science* 40(2):421-427.

Wright, MM. 2013. Can I call you Black? The limits of authentic heteronormativity in African diasporic discourse. *African and Black diaspora: An International Journal* 6(1):3-16.

Yaszek, L. 2006. Afrofuturism, science fiction, and the history of the future. *Socialism and Democracy* 20(3):41-60.