You act like a th'owed away child:
Black Panther, Killmonger, and Pan-Africanist African-American identity[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes to theorise the role of reception and the ways in which it interacts with the sensibilities of a type of Pan-Africanist African-American identity. The romanticising of African feudalism (even the "special" feudalism of Wakanda) is highly problematic. Likewise, the celebration of kings and the reification of things like "traditional courts". The graphic novel of the same name problematises the celebratory mood of the film by highlighting social fissures in Wakanda. In the same ways that notions of royalty and (neo)traditionalism in the real world can be grindingly unfair to working masses and particularly to women, the film *Black Panther* runs the danger of making such issues invisible. The interaction with and reception of the film, however, by black people around the world adds to the meaning and fact of this film and has elevated the screenings to a cultural event. As such, these various screenings add to the text of the film, shaping the Afrofuturist resonance of this text. Ostensibly, *Black Panther* is a super hero film centred on romanticised fictional Pan-African nation and culture. However, it is also an allegory about the place of Africans in the Diaspora in the postcolonial liberation of Africa.

Keywords: *Black Panther*; reception theory; Afrofuturism; Pan-Africanism; colonialism; Feminism; Transatlantic slavery.

Introduction

> Afrofuturism, from its earliest iterations, has been an attempt to imagine an answer to these [existential] questions. The movement spans from free-jazz thinkers like Sun Ra, who wrote of an African past filled with alien technology and extra-terrestrial beings, to the art of Krista Franklin and Ytasha Womack, to the writers Octavia Butler, Nnedi Okorafor and Derrick Bell, to the music of Jamila Woods and Janelle Monáe. Their work, … is a way of upending the system, "because it jumps past the victory. Afrofuturism is like, "We already won" (Wallace 2018).

Like any work of art, *Black Panther* exists on at least three levels, the poesic[2] or level of authorial intent, the textual level or what is actually there, and equally important is the reception level, which represents the social and semiotic interaction with the film's audience and the social world.[3] *Black Panther* quickly became a global phenomenon, making significant contributions on all of these interlocking planes. This article proposes to discuss the role of reception and the ways in which *Black Panther* interacts with the sensibilities of a type of Pan-Africanist, AfricanAmerican identity. *Black Panther*'s narrative engages in a celebration of Pan-African values and histories, while simultaneously interrogating the relationship between continentally-born Africans and those within the Diaspora, especially within the United States. *Black Panther* is a work that engages with a tradition of African-American writing, Afrofuturism, Hollywood film making (especially within the super hero genre), and Pan-Africanist thought. The skilful and innovative use of these sources has resulted in an important film that represents many of the defining characteristics of African-American storytelling.

This understanding of the phenomenon of the film can be fruitfully understood in light of Stuart Hall's historic intervention within reception studies. As the head of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, Hall redirected the course of theorising and analysing televisual phenomenon through two versions of his article "Encoding/Decoding" (Hall 1973,1980). This is particularly so in the first version, which was more explicitly political as it was in response to the state of cultural studies at the time in which the "American Dream" was understood to be triumphant (on the eve of the oil embargo by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, which putatively).

Debunking the then dominant linear model of reception studies in which communication from the producers of televisual content to the audience was straightforward and transparent, Hall's (1973, 1980) new model presented a circuit of *determinant* moments of articulation. In Hall's model this begins with the producer's communication, which relies upon various discourses including social, political and professional, all of which

contained ideological content. Similarly, the reception portion of the circuit allowed for independent understanding and action, incongruent in scope and intent of the producer's communication. In fact, those who received the communication, depending upon the type of response/understanding they brought, could become themselves producers or "reproducers" of communicative content. Fundamentally, this is because there is not necessarily transparency between the understandings of the encoded and decoded message.

Hall (1973, 1980) theorised that reception could take place within three frameworks, including the dominant/hegemonic position, the negotiated position, and the oppositional position. Consumers who decode from the dominant/hegemonic position accept the dominant perspective naturalised in common understanding, and thus understand and accept the message as it was encoded. Within the negotiated position, the audience accepts some parts of the encoded message and rejects others, and then understand or produce meanings not intended by the encoded message. And then there is the oppositional position in which the audience understands the political/social basis of the encoded message and thus correctly interprets the encoded message as intended, but then goes on to reject that understanding as untenable and instead interprets in a way contrary to the encoded message.

Discussing the semiology of music (or film or other works of art) Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1990) mirrors Hall's encoding/decoding theory in an analysis that perhaps seeks to sidestep the explicitly (oppositional) political context of Hall's theorising. A student of Jean Molino, Nattiez (1990) is opposing the then conventional understanding of musical communication. Like Hall, Nattiez (1990) replaces Molino's semiology of music paradigm (see Brandt & do Carmo Jr 2015) with a model that presupposes less transparency in the exchange between authorial intent in their messages and the way audiences perceive them:

"Producer" → Message → Receiver

The chain above represents a model in which audiences supposedly take in communication as the producer intended. This is not unlike the dominant/hegemonic category of communication that Hall theorised. Though one might not ascribe political valence to, say, a listener's ability to discern the technical rigors of Schoenbergian composition. This miscommunication is more likely a technical matter than the social position of the listener (though it is not hard to imagine that these things in fact might be linked). Nattiez (1990) proposed the following to represent his model of musical semiology:

Poietic Process.   Ethesic Process
Producer → Trace ← Receiver

Explaining his model, Nattiez (1990:17) writes:

> Here, the arrow on the right — and this makes all the difference — has been reversed … The semiological theory of Molino, implies, in effect, that … a symbolic form (a poem, a film, a symphony) is not some "intermediary" in a process of "communication" that transmits the meaning intended by an author to an audience … it is instead part of a complex process of creation (the poietic process) that has to do with the form as well as the content of the work … it is also the point of departure for complex process of reception (the ethesic process) that reconstruct a *message*.

This is not unlike Hall's (1973, 1980) encoding/decoding theory, which also theorises a series of unpredictable articulated moments in an asymmetrical interaction between producers and receivers.

Many within Black audiences in the United States and in Africa received the film *Black Panther* from what Hall describes as a negotiated position, at times accepting the celebratory messages of the beauty of African cultures and peoples, the traditional strength of black women, and the inherent potential for greatness of Africans, while remaining critical of encoded messages such as the assumed benevolence of the CIA, and most importantly, the status of villain for the antagonist, Erik "Killmonger" Stevens.

Black Panther within African-American narrative tradition

The African-American narrative tradition from Frederick Douglass' (1845; 1855; 1892)[4] three autobiographies all the way up to its present-day incarnation in *Black Panther* is shaped in form and content by its inception as slave narratives. These stories begin with autobiographical depictions of slavery that narrate the author's experiences with and eventual escape from bondage. Concomitantly, the author narrates his or her journey into literacy, and eventually, full humanity. Usually, these narratives were intended to support the abolitionist cause and were inherently political.[5] Along with jeremiads, essays and other types of writing, the slave narratives have brought into existence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries a distinguished body of fiction that brilliantly details what Orlando Patterson (1985) calls the social death of slavery and its aftermath. Perhaps the two most provocative examples would be Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, because of its artistic merit, and the television series *Roots*, because of its popularity. The 1977 production, *Roots*, was the most watched television show in American history, its audience now been extended by a new production of the series

in 2016. Despite its devastating impact in the 1970s, *Roots* could be described as a sentimental work, after the maiming (and taming) of Kunta Kente, his progeny tried their best to get along under brutal conditions. There are slave narrative movies that are not sentimental, such as the revolutionary *Qilombo* (Diegues 1984) and *Sankofa* (Gerima 1993). In these films the slaves do not just get by; rather, they formally organise and fight against slavery. Their protagonists are militant and never lose their African identity. Similarly, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (Dixson 1973) is a revolutionary, Pan-African film set in the urban ghettoes of the United States, in which the protagonist helps to organise a militant uprising. In fact, in these films it is their Pan-African perspective that gives spiritual succour to their revolutionary efforts. The modernised, fictional slave narrative is also undergoing further development in works like Yaa Gyasi's (2016) *Homecoming*, in which the story takes place on both sides of the Atlantic. Importantly, especially in relation to the film *Black Panther*, *Homecoming* (2016) doesn't exclude the part of the story in which Africans participated willingly in the slave trade.

It is with these additions, both the Pan-African aspect and the subplot of African complicity within the slave trade, that gives *Black Panther* its artistic power and political relevance. While its Afrofuturist setting does not allow a literal and explicit critique of slavery, the shadow of slavery's social death marks the hero/anti-hero character of Eric "Killmonger" Stevens, who is a descendant of Wakanda, but also an African-American. As an African-American he inherits the social death of being a racialised ex-slave as much as he inherited his royal status within Wakandan society. He represents the combination of the might of a nation that was never colonised with the Pan-African militancy that was developed in the United States through such organisations as the Black Panther Party. While Killmonger is the putative antagonist of the plot, his political perspective and militancy marks him as the potential hero in the black world of *Black Panther*'s social reception.

As is the case in most science fiction, the actual subject matter of the film is always the present-day struggles against hegemonic powers and the hierarchies they set up, be they social class, racial caste, colonial and imperial machinations in geo-political positioning, gender-based relations, or what have you. Typically, science fiction sublimates the contemporary relevance of these issues, presenting them as either futuristic or extra-terrestrial. *Black Panther* presents many of the classic themes of science fiction, including colonialism, international crime syndicates, slavery and its aftermath, gender relations, and class. The mineral riches, technical superiority, and invisibility of Wakanda accomplish the sublimation. While there are progressive elements in the characterisation of Wakanda, the textual content of the film ultimately subverts its intentions to be revolutionary. It leaves unanswered too many injustices, and lapses into the dominant/hegemonic mode with regards to economic and socio-political mores.

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Chadwick Boseman as T'Challa/Black Panther ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

For instance, the *Pax Americana* emphasis, a staple in space opera genre since it was explicitly rendered in the television series, *Star Trek*, is implied through the character, Agent Ross. Ross is a self-sacrificing CIA operative who is not only friendly to Africans, he places his life at risk several times to aid the cause of Wakanda. Movie depictions of the CIA have been revised, taking their cue from television shows such as *Homeland* and *Madam Secretary* which rehabilitate television CIA operatives as thoughtful defenders of freedom the world over. These television CIA agents are humanised further by depicting their struggles to balancing the raising of their families. Viewing them through their virtuous exploits, these narratives construe the CIA as a benign force fighting for America's interest in freedom throughout the world (see Parramore 2018). This is one of the aspects of *Black Panther* that black audiences find patently absurd, knowing the suspicions of the CIA's most undemocratic involvement in the government of Chile (the assassination of democratic socialist, Salvador Allende, and the subsequent support of dictator, Augusto Pinochet). Closer to Central Africa where the fictional Wakanda is located, many still grieve the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, freedom fighter and head of state of the mineral rich Congo, and so on and so forth. The similarity to the mineral-rich Wakanda is too close for comfort.

FIGURE **Nº 2**   ‹

Chadwick Boseman as T'Challa/Black Panther ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Martin Freeman as CIA Agent, Everett K Ross ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

The United States's support of the apartheid state of South Africa and other repressive regimes, and its suppression of the freedom struggles of the non-white poor in many countries throughout the world are always already in the imaginary that surrounds the CIA. In the governing of the nation's foreign policy there exists a putative liberal/conservative/Republican/Democratic consensus. This seemingly unlikely consensus is formed through a widespread anti-socialist fervour that effectively excuses American imperialist aggression, whether it be in Vietnam, Palestine, or Cuba. While the differences between liberals and conservatives, or between Democrats and Republicans, are often significant and wide-ranging, the distance between their positions is considerably less when it comes to foreign policy, especially where it involves the United States' continued dominance in the world. Some black people are particularly inoculated against swallowing the fictions that rationalise these actions simply. State-sanctioned aggression and unpunished extra-legal violence have been visited upon African-Americans throughout the history of the nation, from the horrors of slavery, to the unwillingness of the nation's legislature to pass an anti-lynching bill, to the tacitly tolerated police violence against black people fuelling the current Black Lives Matter movement. The cognitive dissonance is impossible to ignore.

Black Love

As a smartly-made Disney movie, and as a part of the constellation of superhero films about the Marvel universe, *Black Panther* has proven a financial triumph. But the dollars the movie makes is only one aspect of its public reception, particularly amongst black people in Africa and throughout the diaspora. From a black point of view, a nexus of concerns and long wished for desiderata are addressed in the film. Many of the audiences throughout the world have received the film as a romantic Afrofuturist exploration of what it might look like for a nation in Africa to be a powerful player in the current geopolitical landscape. As such, it is a nearly irresistible work of art. Here is a film that is gorgeous in its production values and actors. *Black Panther* is meticulously Pan-African in its use of languages, music, rituals, fashion, and most importantly, its regard for the existence of and philosophical attitude towards the ancestors. More than an item on a checklist, this regard includes its attendant spirituality, historical references to institutions, heroic figures, and so on. Even though there are untenable parts of the plot, these are more than enough elements for many people to love *Black Panther* for its progressive elements, and even potentially revolutionary ideas.
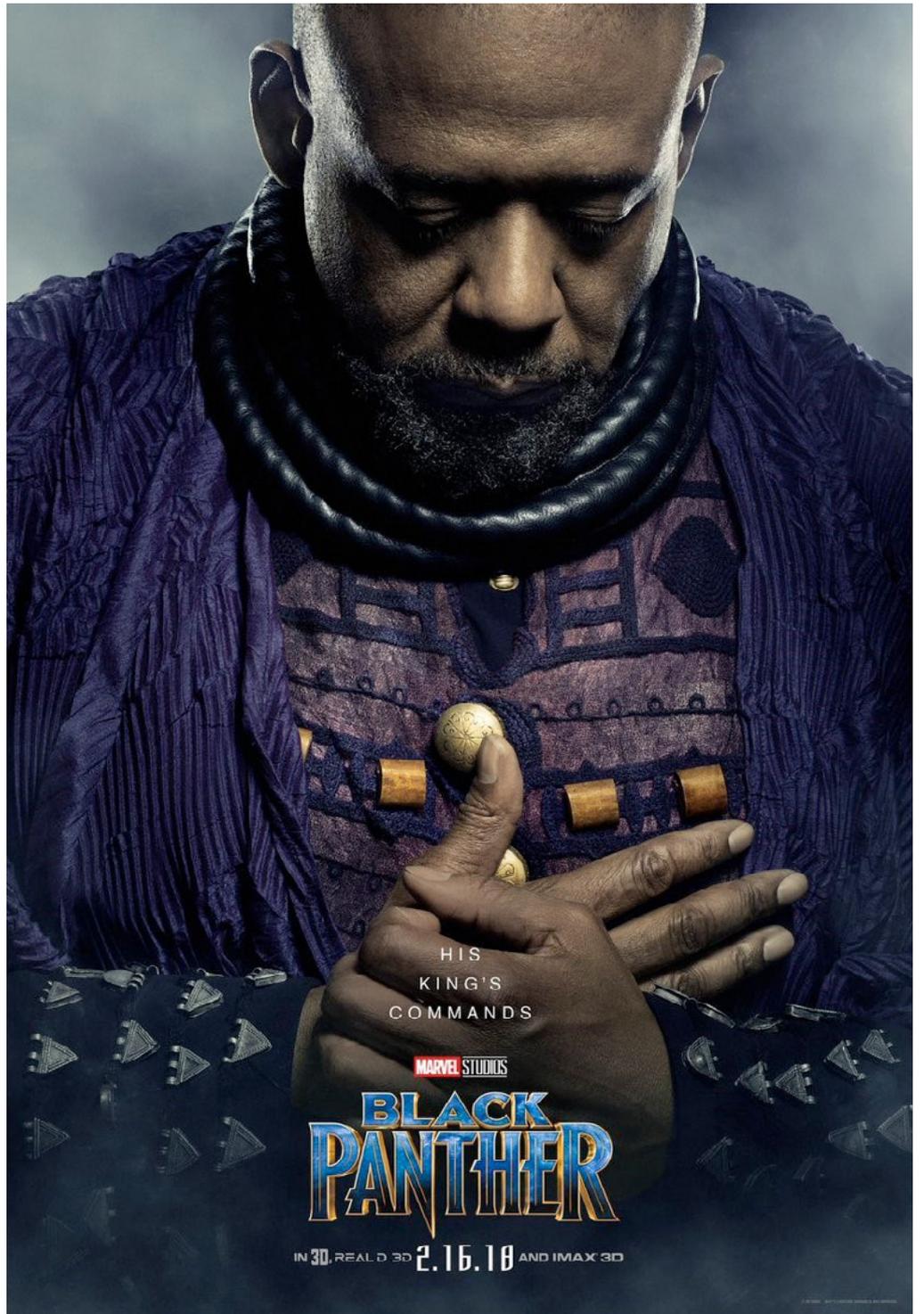
FIGURE **Nº 4** ‹

Forest Whitaker as Zuri, the elder statesman in Wakanda ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

After all, it is an antidote to the well-established tradition of pejorative filmic depictions of Africa by Hollywood, beginning with the institution of tropes found in *Tarzan* (starting in 1918, blossoming in the 1930s, reprised as a Disney animation in 1999 and most recently as an action film in 2016) and to dramas such as *Last King of Scotland* (MacDonald 2006) and *Blood Diamond* (Zwick 2006) in which the nations and cultures of the continent are exotic but backwards, endowed with riches but mismanaged by superstitious anti-intellectual leaders and cultures, tradition rich but impotent in the power dynamics of the modern world. Moreover, this invention of Africa by those who plundered and colonised it is firmly buttressed by the philosophic underpinnings of western intellectual thought including the Enlightenment itself. From the lofty heights of the Enlightenment philosophers, and with the need to justify the Atlantic slave trade and the genocide and settler colonialism of the Americas and elsewhere, these racist views were subsequently permeated popular consciousness through political philosophy, governance, films, books and various media. Jelani Cobb (2018) explains that the invention of Wakanda is in response to this earlier invention of Africa:

> *Black Panther*, … exists in an invented nation in Africa, a continent that has been grappling with invented versions of itself ever since white men first declared it the "dark continent" and set about plundering its people and its resources. This fantasy of Africa as a place bereft of history was politically useful, justifying imperialism. It found expression in the highest echelons of Western thought and took on the contours of truth. In 1753, the Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote, "I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and all other species of men . . . to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was any civilized nation of any complexion other than white." Two centuries later, the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote, "Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa".

Black Panther is a direct answer to the views expressed about black people by the likes of Hume and other Enlightenment philosophers, including Voltaire and Kant, who held equally vicious views on the cultural and intellectual potential of Africans. Here is a film in which Africa is in the present and future. In this vision of Africa, the harmonious glories that Africans are capable of is not relegated to a romantic past. Wakandans are presented as relishing their traditions, but not as primitives, not as weak, conquered souls still squandering their riches to their (ex)colonisers. They are modern actors in science and technology; and now entering the world stage through politics. Wakanda, as a definitively African country, has entered political and economic maturity without succumbing to western cultural imperialism. No silly white wigs for judges in Wakanda, no westernised three-piece suits for public servants. Rather, there is an institutionalised respect for African perspectives on the ancestors, political institutions, and other philosophical and cultural aspects of African life (Gates & Appiah 1985).

A precursor to Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* is the Marvel Comic Book series written by MacArthur Fellow, Ta-Nehisi Coates. In the comic book, these issues are raised much more provocatively and explicitly revolutionary in characterisation. For instance, the *Black Panther*, criticised in the Marvel film universe for joining the avengers when his primary responsibility is as head of state/king of Wakanda, is criticised for standing as a monarch in the comic book. There is in fact a revolt led by Wakandan citizens against the institution of the monarchy. Concomitantly, there is a peasant uprising which threatens to topple the reigning economic system upon which the monarchy depends. The dominant (obligatory) romantic story in the film is between the Black Panther, King T'Challa and Nakia, who after the usual narrative obstacles eventually become a royal couple. The secondary love story is between W'Kabi, leader of Wakanda's national defence, and Okoye the head of the Dora Milaje, the women warriors tasked with guarding the throne. In the comic book series written by Coates, the dominant love story is between two lesbian lovers in the Dora Milaje who were militantly in defiance of their orders to protect the throne. Rather, they were protecting the rights of abused women and the general populace rather than the throne. The secondary love-relationship is lived in the ancestral realm involving the philosopher who had spread ideas that are being used to foment the revolution against the monarchy (see Gay 2018).

If the film *Black Panther* is by comparison with the comic book series less revolutionary in its narrative surrounding the main women characters, it is, nevertheless, true that one of the film's most significant characteristics is its strongly feminist disposition. Wakanda is a world in which women are by turns, fierce, playful, intelligent, courageous, and ethical. And let's not forget powerful. It is only recently that black women have leading roles in Hollywood that exceed the limitations of minstrel stereotypes, and still rare that they are multi-dimensional in their portrayal. The women characters of Wakanda are delightfully human and often more advanced in their understanding and bravery than their male counterparts. Added to this (against the conventions of Hollywood films), most of the female protagonists are dark-skinned. Nevertheless, we never see women in the ancestral realm. Nor do we see women fighting in ritual combat for control of the realm, although they form the military might of the nation and the technical genius that allows Wakanda to exploit its vibranium.

In fact, some black commentators weighed in against the hype and seemingly unrestrained celebration of the film. Patrick Gathara (2018), writing for *The Washington Post*, is completely put off by the film's indulgence with the romantic aspects of Afrofuturism in the film. In fact, he sees little difference in the film's portrayal of Wakanda and the colonialist visions of Africa of earlier works:

This is a vision of Africa that could only spring from the neo-colonial mind. It is really telling how close a black "redemptive counter-mythology" sails to the colonial vision of a childish people needing a strong guiding hand to lead them. Despite their centuries of vibranium-induced technological advancement, the Wakandans remain so remarkably unsophisticated that a "returning" American can basically stroll in and take over, just as 19th-century Europeans did to the real Africa.

Here, Gathara (2018) seems to imply that the colonisation of Africa was primarily because of their lack of sophistication. This is somewhat contradicted by his insistence that Africa is an invention of Europe. This is undoubtedly true, and it is also true that Pan-African thought developed among the descendants of slaves in the New World. This shouldn't be so difficult to understand. However, Gathara (2018) reveals that he has several axes to grind at the film's expense when he claims that *Black Panther*'s stereotypical rendering of Africa is tantamount to a skit on Chinese state-broadcaster CCTV set in Kenya 'featuring a Chinese actress in blackface and fake massive buttocks, African actors in monkey costumes and hordes of other grateful blacks gushing: "I love China!"' This type of buffoonery and mindless minstrelsy is found nowhere in the film and is a grossly unfair comparison. Most reviewers who wanted to temper the enthusiasm that lit up cyberspace and social media with adoring fans by the thousands were not so vicious in their appraisal. For instance, Khanya Khondlo Mtshali (2018) makes her point in the title of her piece in *The Guardian*: '*Black Panther* is great. But let's not treat it as an act of resistance'. Her cautioning of viewers not to conflate the film with political acts probably seemed necessary, precisely because for so many black viewers *Black Panther* is a revolutionary artefact, and the support, which include the attendant commentary, organising, and even the revelling all constitute revolutionary actions.

Mtshali perhaps misses the point, though, in trying to limit revolutionary actions to the heroic and institution building efforts of groups like both of the Black Panther parties. This is not unreasonable. And for those who think that the massive support black audiences, *and* white and others, give to *Black Panther* will necessarily translate into more African-centred films and stories, just think back to the optimistic hysteria the television series *Roots*[6] prompted and how quickly black themes and actors were pushed back into the usual minstrelsy-inspired fare, with notable exceptions of course. Many commentators, however, see revolutionary agency in such artefacts/happenings as James Brown eschewing his famous pompadour to wear his hair natural and recording his historic *Say It Loud (I'm Black and Proud).* Artistic contributions to progressive moments can be found in the inspiration they provide for activists and for the general populace. *Black Panther* with its reception including cosplay,[7] attending screenings in African-inspired attire, the resurgence of the dog pound, the adoption of the Wakandan salute, has contributed to a moment of celebration of the beauty of blackness and black people.

Carvell Wallace (2018) frames the question from the decoding side of Hall's equation:

> Beyond the question of what the movie will bring to African-Americans sits what might be a more important question: What will black people bring to "*Black Panther*"? The film arrives as a corporate product, but we are using it for our own purposes, posting with unbridled ardour about what we're going to wear to the opening night, announcing the depths of the squads we'll be rolling with, declaring that Feb. 16, 2018 will be "the Blackest Day in History".

He explains that this 'unrestrained celebration and joy' is part of the equipment black people use for their spiritual survival, the reason 'we love ourselves in the loud and public way we do' (Wallace 2018:8). For Wallace it is a question of love, "Black Love".

Duncan Omanga and Pamela C Mainye (2019) argue that *Black Panther* was received as enthusiastically by Kenyans as by African-Americans. Partially owing to the fact that Lupita Nyong'o, a successful Hollywood actress from Kenya, played a significant role in the film and also in its reception "back home". The social media in Kenya revealed that *Black Panther* breaking attendance records most people viewed the film more than once. People had the same array of Wakandan hashtags that became instantly popular amongst African-Americans. In Kenya though, people found ways to include Wakanda in their names. Aside from the loyalty to Kenyan actors on the Hollywood big screen, Africans are also attracted to the aesthetic and political interventions of Afrofuturism. This is so even if the narrative is one that 'hold[s] the diaspora at its core' (Omanga & Mainye 2019:4). The authors place the importance of the diaspora as a central concern of modern African authors such as Ben Okri, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Chimamanda Adichie. We can easily add other important contemporary African authors such as NoViolet Bulawayo or Taiye Telasi. It is, of course, a supreme irony that this particular story is clothed in a national narrative of power. Progressive thinkers are trying to make icons of songs, images, and narratives that are not so closely tied to the violence and falsity of national identities. This is important most especially in Africa where the supposed "imagined communities" did not have much say in setting the national boundaries but are sitting as nations in part because of having been subjugated through colonialism. And T'Challa must be king of the Wakandan nation, even though not all Wakandans see this as a natural or benign arrangement. Certainly, African-Americans are excluded if all legitimate power is held by nation states. So, "Killmonger" is actually usurping T'Challa's position as he fights to become the head of the nation state, only to dispense weapons throughout the black world in such a way that will eventually erode his autonomy and good will amongst his subjects, and ultimately work against the idea of Wakanda's superiority *as* a nation state. But to reject Killmonger's quest is to decode the film with a great

deal of congruence with the encoding message. Ultimately, it's not so much that "Killmonger's" quest is wrong or immoral, but his position as an African-American/ Wakandan disadvantages his ability to effectively wage his war against colonialism and he feels forced to adopt the imperialist strategies that he is ostensibly fighting against. Derilene Marco (2018) ultimately concludes that *Black Panther* is not an Afrofuturist film, but merely markets its work as performing 'being lit'. For her, for instance, the powerful images of the three women characters, one the head of the (all-female) army, the other the head of science and technology for the nation, and the other a crusader for justice of the dispossessed (ironically actually doing what "Killmonger" says he wants to do), all fall short of the feminist goal of creating a site of disturbance. While they do so in the encoded message of the film narrative, she avers that they fail to do so 'in the affective experience these characters potentially elucidate in a heteronormative patriarchal society' (Marco 2018:8). Ironically, she sees "Killmonger's" character as being more fully fleshed in this regard, as his character reveals and acknowledges the problematic of his *double consciousness* (though Marco acknowledges Paul Gilroy rather than WEB Dubois for this theoretical intervention). A case in point are his "dying" words, when he requests that T'Challa throw his body with his ancestors in the Atlantic Ocean, for they knew that death was better than bondage. I choose to decode this message as rehabilitating the nobility of his cause despite his recklessness.

Of course, not all Kenyan commentators loved the film. Tiyemba Zeleza (2018), a Malawian-born critic based in Kenya wrote that *Black Panther* fell somewhere between a tribute to the Afrocentric imaginary of Africa, and a reproduction of colonial stereotypes about Africa.

Black Panther Pan-African

The film features isiXhosa, Kiswahili, and other African languages, actors from various African countries, and *also* Africans who reside in Germany, Britain and the United States. Atypically, African-Americans are presented as part of the diasporic reality of continentally-born Africans. Throughout the film, the fate and reality of Wakanda is intimately linked to that of inner-city Afro America. The heir to the Wakandan throne is raised in the Oakland ghetto. The resonance of this fact with the historical Black Panther Party is of course deliberate-both the Black Panther Party that was organised to register black voters in murderous Mississippi (or as Nina Simone would have it, *Mississippi Goddam!* (1964) and the Black Panther Party organised in Oakland to feed and teach the black community, and to protect it against police brutality. We can see

Huey Newton's (co-founder of the Black Panther Party) image on a poster in "Killmonger's" home. Both organisations were declared the enemies of racist America, and both suffered homicidal reprisals throughout the land at the hands of extra-legal vigilantes, the police departments, and the FBI. The movie does not explicitly link the film's Black Panther with the historical Black Panthers, but it cannot be insignificant that Killmonger is from the Oakland ghetto where the party was founded, or that his father was involved in community organising when he was killed for being a traitor to Wakanda. Those who thought the movie's central protagonist would overtly espouse the revolutionary agenda of the Black Panthers will necessarily be disappointed. However, if we can see Killmonger as black reception of the film sees him, that is, as a combination of hero and anti-hero, we can draw different conclusions about the deep meaning of the film.

Killmonger as an African-America embodies the well-worn tropes throughout Africa and even the Caribbean in which African-Americans are considered to be spoiled, rude, and culturally impoverished (despite the seemingly universal appeal of African-American vernacular culture amongst the youth of all nations). African-Americans are widely considered to be bastard children consumed with "attitude" and anger. This portrayal has especially gained currency with the rise in popularity of hip-hop culture. Perhaps it would be good to amend this statement and admit that it is rap music rather than hip-hop culture that has painted the current global image of African-Americans. As a commercially exploited genre, rap is disproportionately marketed in the titillating *gangsta* variety. The deeper, philosophically oriented music and art work of the more underground hip-hop culture is not as familiar to persons who do not consider themselves to be part of hip-hop culture. Those who rely upon radio play and video releases are people who are essentially consumers of rap music rather than denizens of the hip-hop nation (see Perry 2007).

Eric "Killmonger" inherits his regrettable name from the earliest *Black Panther* comics in which the character was a mutant killer form the continent. In the film, however, he is definitively marked as African-American. The opening scene of the movie includes street ball, basketball, the most practiced art form by African-American males. "Killmonger" demeanour and speech patterns are deeply marked by African-American vernacular culture. His mellifluous greeting of his aunt ('hey, auntie!') in the tense moments when making his challenge to the throne, his use of black slang throughout the film, his challenge of the museum curator before he makes his theft, his "feeling" the mask, and countless other details make it impossible to mistake that this is a young black man 'from the hood'.

Where we run into problems is that the thug like nature of "Killmonger" is too uncomfortably close to the thug like elements reputed among the historical Black Panthers. Respect for our heroes and the knowledge that they are always already demonised, it is difficult to even speak of it. After all, Huey Newton was a petty criminal and died in the throes of addiction; worse, Eldridge Cleaver (1968) admitted to committing the one crime for which there is never enough extenuating circumstances to justify it, apologetics in *Soul on Ice* (1968) notwithstanding. Honourable people can understand his motivations and perhaps even his methods when "Killmonger" kills military combatants and prepares for his greatest martial challenge with the Black Panther. We can also understand when he recaptures the vibranium stolen from his ancestral homeland. When he says to the curator, 'how much did your ancestors pay for this?' we are brought to our knowledge that many of the riches of Africa were plundered and some can only be admired in the museums of the west. Civilizations that stole humans did not hesitate to steal artistic artefacts. So, as a Wakandan, Erik has a direct claim on the precious metal; as an African-American he has a spiritual birth right that was stolen in virtually all its dimensions. But, when he, without hesitation, kills his girlfriend and comrade in arms to secure his entrance into Wakanda, I am brought back to Eldridge Cleaver's (1968) admission that he serially raped black women to prepare himself to rape white women as though it were little more than a political tactic.

Despite this sad criminality (a criminality that must needs be understood sociologically, and not in any straightforward and simple way as merely a personal lapse of morality), there is no doubt that their being incarcerated allowed them a particular viewpoint of American society and contributed to their politicisation. One thinks, for instance, of Malcolm X, or of George Jackson, both men who despite having been petty criminals were transformed into clear-eyed, brilliant political analysts during their incarceration. Moreover, there is a social class of African-Americans, particularly during the mid-twentieth century who created a genre of street and jailhouse poetry known as "toasts". In these poems, typically performed in social gatherings or in jail houses almost exclusively for male, working class audiences, outlaw figures such as pimps and "bad men" are revered and praised for their anti-establishment antics and their clever avoidance of "slaving" for "the man" (see Kackson 2004). How much easier is it to forgive petty criminality in the cases of transformed freedom fighters?

Their bodacious swagger and (to use the vernacular of "Killmonger", or for that matter Huey P Newton) 'don't-give-a-fuck' attitude towards the state's apparatus of oppression against black people as important, but not the most important part of the Black Panthers Party's appeal to young African-Americans. Equally important was the social analysis that was well thought out and even internationalist in its scope. More important was the organisation's commitment to poor black people. The literacy classes, the

free breakfast programs, and the protection against police brutality are the hallmarks of the Black Panther programs. Just as the efforts of black people to found schools and gain literacy in the post-bellum era inspired the nation to adopt public education for its youth, the Black Panther Party's breakfast programs resulted in widespread breakfast and lunch programs for learners throughout the country. Similarly, the real heroes of the movement are overshadowed by the "royalty" if you will. Persons like Fred Hampton and Mike Clark, civic leaders who were both assassinated by the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), embodied the real promise of the organisation (Seal 1970; Williams 2013). The dominant/hegemonic view of the Black Panther Party led the *Black Panther* comic book to change its name for a while to *Black Leopard* to avoid associations with the BPP.

And this is one of the two central attractions for some black audiences towards "Killmonger". First, he wants the liberation of black people throughout the world. This is Pan-Africanist thought at its most militant. And he understands that he will have to fight the powerful Wakandan king in order to join this fight in a meaningful way, that is with the advantage of Wakanda's technology and minerals. That the antagonist is black doesn't bother me as much as it does some commentators, in real life there will be no marching to freedom without confronting one another. The historical record speaks volumes on this: that the underdeveloped character of Killmonger is killed before we can mine the depths of his potential, that the family is not able to overcome the problems represented within, is perhaps the most damning flaw of the movie.

The desire to help free "his people" is his virtue, fuelled as it is by his anger at being left behind by his African family, which is the second theme that African-Americans have a unique appreciation for. From his point of view, he has been treated like "a th'owed away child". That is, African-Americans are the ones who were defenceless against their incarceration and enslavement; those who managed to thrive in bleak conditions designed to reduce humans into chattel, and a people who have overcome centuries of suffering only to be seen as uncouth thugs without the necessary grace or cultural aplomb to be respected as Africans.

In the pantheon of 'heroic' Pan-Africanists African-Americans are truly present. From the designing thoughts of WEB DuBois and George Padmore, to the activism of Marcus Garvey to the symbolic resistance of Tommy Smith and Juan Carlos, and Muhammad Ali to the artistry of Randy Weston, Bob Marley, and Katherine Dunham, African-Americans could see themselves as distinguished contributors to the Black Atlantic, and perhaps even forerunners in Pan-African thought and action.

This line of reasoning is all but erased, however, in the way in which the character is unable to shake his trauma enough to present himself as a worthy leader. African-Americans do have good attributes as well and we have contributed mightily to Pan-Africanism as well. Of course, "Killmonger" wants to continue this contribution, but he is demonstrably reckless and a part of you want him to succeed and a part is afraid of the potential harm that one can foresee without great imaginative powers. He is loud and disrespectful. There is hardly anyone, even a sympathetic person, who doubts that "Killmonger" will leave Wakanda worse than he inherited it. That the release of Wakanda's technology to freedom fighters throughout the world might land power in the hands of someone irresponsible or even unscrupulous.

Worse, the almost obligatory *Pax Americana* of the superhero genre (and other science fiction genres like the space opera, for instance) rears its ugly head. To have the CIA represented as friendly to black people and to Wakanda in particular is patently absurd. Yet, in *Black Panther*, agent Ross is a more tenable ally than "Killmonger". A similar disconnect occurs in the film's second ending, a coda reserved for those who stuck around during the credits. Here Wakanda has gone to the United Nations as the site of justice seeking. They will use the UN to administer justice to the world and to distribute their riches and might. Like the rehabilitated CIA agent, this could be a sop to white audiences who make up the bulk of the Marvel fans. But again, it brings us shy of having the discussions about the underlying drama of the enslavement of African-Americans, the role of Africans ourselves in this holocaust, and the 'social death' of the descendants of slavery, to use Orlando Patterson's phrase (1985).

The movie, within the strictures of its genre expectations, tries at least to give a nod to these dilemmas even if its solution was the worst one possible. And here is where the reception of an artistic work is so valuable. Nobody seems to accept that ending as okay. *Abantu* have reworked the meaning of this film away from anything that Stan Lee and company envisaged. For many of us Wakanda is not the province of royal entitlement, and "Killmonger" is not the spoiled brat of the west. We are already acknowledging the sequel and are hoping for the radical transformation of the Black Panther and the apparent resurrection of "Killmonger" (we never actually see him thrown in the ocean he could revive as did the Black Panther when he was bested by "Killmonger"). Rather, they are the embodiment of what is possible. We can be beautifully powerful and morally upright, fight our oppressors and WIN.

For me it was revealing to watch the film among mostly *isiZulu* speakers in *eThekwini*. As in Afro America, *isiZulu* speakers relish in talking back to the film and will also answer each other's quips. This practice adds a layer to the screening experience. Rather than passively accepting the textual message of the work of art, the film is

amended through its reception. Immediately, the audience vets these amendments. The response of the fellow film goers determines the validity of the quip or commentary proffered to give the audience's point of view.

The reaction to the appellation "coloniser", for instance, was so robust I could not hear the next minute of dialogue. The delight and laughter in appreciation of Shuri's clarity about the CIA agent's relationship to her culture was such as if to say we are not fooled by the sentimentality attempted by the text of the film. In the reaction to one word, the audience reinterpreted the film's clumsy attempt to rehabilitate the CIA and to present it as benign.

Another instance involved comments being made about the ancestral realm and the characters' access to it inflected through the Durban (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa) situation of city dwellers needing their family homes, *ekhaya* ("home") to access *enthakini*. This is an audience of mostly township dwellers, and perhaps some suburban dwellers, which is to say people with the same difficulties to face when doing traditional rituals and the like. So, even before analysing the text of the film, the reception already tells us that black people are having a public conversation/demonstration of our pride in ourselves, our need to envision ourselves as beautiful, cool, powerful, wise and visionary.

One strong focus of this conversation is the need to celebrate the genius and courage of our women in particular. In countless theatres across the globe black women were out in force, often wearing Afrocentric dress. The solidarity implied in this phenomenon is of course symbolic, and it remains to be seen what will come of it. The spectacle was dignified as an actual celebration and raised the conglomeration of the various screening to a cultural event. To those who scoff that this is useless and merely symbolic I am reminded of the many instances throughout the history of African peoples when symbolism was a turning point to be utilised by other historical actors. At some point, there is the question of the revolutionary efficacy of black pleasure, especially of this kind, the kind that is in dialogue with a noxious, anti-black narrative. Consider the iconic power of the first Black Panther Party's Fannie Lou Hamer proclaiming, 'I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired' (Demuth 2009), along with her steadfast courage and integrity of course; and Huey Newton's "Off the pigs" (Black Panther Party founder,1968). Any consideration of realpolitik is confronted with the role of symbolic actions and words as part of the struggle against oppression, or in this case hegemonic narratives. Now we witness the Wakandan salute with a message akin to raising the fist during the black power days, or the African-American dog pound being resurrected as a war cry, silencing colonisers and energising warriors.

The anti-hero is a new focus in the Marvel universe, and we are given an array of them in *Black Panther*. There is no straightforward revolutionary force in *Black Panther*; rather, there are startling progressive elements like the portrayal of black women. The only revolutionary potential of the film is in the ways in which it affects the reception of its viewers and the ways in which *Black Panther* has filtered into popular culture. This reception can have to power to effectively rewrite regressive elements of the film. For example, the romanticising of African feudalism, even the 'special' feudalism of Wakanda, is highly problematic. Similarly, the celebration of kings and the reification of things like "traditional courts" present potential dangers to the ordinary citizens of the nation. The graphic novel, *Black Panther*, written by Ta-Nehisi Coates, problematises the celebratory mood of the film by highlighting social fissures in Wakanda. In the same ways that notions of royalty and (neo)traditionalism in the real world can be grindingly unfair to working masses and particularly to women, the film *Black Panther* runs the danger of making such issues invisible.

The interaction and reception of the film, however, by black people around the world adds to the meaning and fact of this film and has elevated the screenings to a cultural event. As such these various screenings add to the text of the film. That is, this reception shapes the Afrofuturist resonance of this text. Ostensibly, *Black Panther* is a superhero film centred on a romanticised Pan-African nation and culture. However, at the textual level and most especially with the conditions of reception it is an allegory about the place of Africans in the Diaspora in the post-colonial liberation of Africa. African-American identity colours the plot and reception of the film, and the ways in which the intervention of reception raises the sub plot of the "orphaned Diaspora" to the level of a central concern of the film.

What some black audiences take from the movie is not necessarily in line with the dominant narrative that movie establishment might intend. In recent times shows like *Madam Secretary* present a rehabilitated portrait of the CIA. In the light-hearted series a power couple, one working with the CIA and the other ex-CIA, are conscientious persons with high profile jobs (the husband is an ethics professor, the wife the secretary of state for the USA). They balance managing geopolitical crises – always on the side of the angels – with the raising of their young adult children with aplomb, each episode neatly solving emotional needs of their children while "saving" the world one crisis at a time. Another televisual depiction of the CIA is found in the series *Homeland* (2011-present) It is decidedly less sentimental and is certainly grittier than *Madam Secretary. Homeland*'s protagonist is a single parent, field operative who suffers from bi-polar disorder. The audience sees her getting her hands dirty, but always in service of greater freedom in the world. *Black Panther*'s CIA character is like the protagonist of *Madam Secretary*, Elizabeth "Bess" Adams McCord (Téa Leoni) (2014-present); he

is cute and lovable. He puts his life at risk to help protect the Black Panther and even becomes a hero in his selfless exploits. One could not imagine such a person being connected to an organisation that would topple lawful governments, assassinate Allende, or participate in the murder of Lumumba. This, from a black perspective, is almost impossible to accept, which fuelled the raucous laughter at the CIA operative being referred to as "coloniser". Apparently, the film producers are aware of the irony of the character as he is presented in the plot, recognising that black people do not necessarily buy the story of the CIA being tireless fighters for democracy throughout the world.

There are many examples of this reception-based intervention operating in this fashion. One can think of the "Obama moment" when Harlem erupted in celebration, bringing memories of when the Brown Bomber beat Max Schelling (Wulfhorst 2009). In the film universe we can cite black audiences celebrating film hero John Shaft, in *Shaft* (Singleton 2000) though he sometimes worked with cops and other anti-revolutionary forces. This repurposing what one needs from the culture of the oppressor is a basic right of artistic consumption and is in evidence towards a fashioning of Afrofuturism in *Black Panther*.

Notes

1. This is an attempt at a phonetic spelling of a traditional saying in the African-American community. A "th'owed away child" (a child thrown away) refers to a neglected person who thus appears and acts forlorn.

2. The poesic, in musicological studies represent the practical side of musical expression as opposed to the *ethesic*, which represents the internalisation of the artistic production. See Laskewicz, 2003.

3. See Nattiez 1990.

4. Frederick Douglass (b:1818, d:1895) was an American author, statesman, abolitionist, social reformer, writer and orator.

5. For the history of African-American slave narratives see Davis and Gates, Jr (1985).

6. *Roots* was nominated for dozens of Emmy awards and won several prestigious awards. It still has the honour of the highest Nielsen rating of any show produced for television (Adalian 2016).

7. The word "cosplay" is a portmanteau combining "costume" and "play." Social media was alight with movie goers dressing up in Wakandan-like attire.

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