Afrofuturism and decolonisation: using *Black Panther* as methodology

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ABSTRACT

The terms Afrofuturism and decolonisation may both occupy prominent positions in the contemporary moment but they are not often projected into the same conceptual space. While the task of decolonising the curricula at South Africa's tertiary institutions looms large in the contemporary moment, for the particular disciplines of art history and visual studies, the task of creating new curricula has often taken on a temporal valence as there is a certain anxiety about making references to historical African culture in the present. Afrofuturism, however, seeks to create fissures in the present moment by using references the past to envision futures that counter a negative historical imaginary. Following an analysis of the art historical curricula at tertiary institutions in South Africa, this paper seeks to discuss the notion of both Afrofuturism and decolonisation as temporal dislocations and discursive disruptions. By looking at the film *Black Panther* and its numerous references to historical African art and visual culture this paper proposes that the concept of Afrofuturism may provide a method for the study of contemporary art forms through the lens of the historical and as such a potential approach to discursive decolonisation.

Keywords: *Black Panther*; Afrofuturism; decolonisation; African art; art history; curricula.

Introduction

When academics engage in discussion there are always certain concepts that illicit a greater reaction because they are prominent in the contemporary moment. As I write this paper, the term decolonisation is one such concept: resting on the tip of many tongues and loaded with the potential for sparking debate. In this latter part of 2018 choosing to allude to the film *Black Panther* or Afrofuturism may too spark passionate discussion or, as is the case with decolonisation, it may engender a jaded eye roll for what some might see as an overuse of the words and a contemporary

tendency to relate everything to them. One of the aims of this paper is to provide a discussion catalysed by projecting these notions into the same conceptual space and asking in what ways that overlap may be useful for the study of visual culture. A further aim is to discuss the manner in which the conceptualisation of time impacts our understanding of the decolonial project as it is the way that the past is perceived to relate to the present that structures both the contemporary focus on decolonisation and the methodological use of Afrofuturism. In order to achieve this aim, I begin here with an analysis of Afrofuturism as a method employed in *Black Panther* that is potentially useful in the project of decolonisation, move on to a discussion of the particular concerns in decolonising the tertiary curriculum of art and visual culture in South Africa and then discuss the way in which *Black Panther* and its numerous references to historical African art and visual culture may be perceived as both Afrofuturist and decolonial.

The film *Black Panther* (2018) has been hailed as ground-breaking in its empowering depiction of black characters, its creation of heroic figures and its reference to African cultural forms. Much of this positive critique is based on the notion that *Black Panther* employs Afrofuturism as a method. The term Afrofuturism was first employed by Mark Dery (1994) in his commentary on a series of interviews titled *Black to the future* where he defined Afrofuturism as, '[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns … signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future' (Dery 1994:180). The term subsequently gained traction as a useful way to describe a host of artistic phenomena including the experimental music of Sun Ra, the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat and more recently a host of young artists, designers and the film *Black Panther*. It is Dery's emphasis on the connection between past, present and future in his analysis that is most relevant to my discussion here as it emphasises artistic references across temporal space and the shattering of a linear conception of time. In Dery's interview, the academic Tricia Rose references Sun Ra's imagery and emphasises the importance of historical presence and roots in the imaginary, 'If you're going to imagine yourself a future, you have to imagine where you've come from; ancestor worship in black culture is a way of countering a historical erasure. At the same time, romantic visions of an agrarian memory of black creativity are seriously problematic' (Dery 1994). Here, Rose emphasises the key issue in the referencing of historical African art and culture in the present: the all too easy oscillation between empowering nods to cultural pride and offensive references that champion a problematic notion of unobtainable authenticity. Rose's statement also alludes to the notion that, although fraught, an understanding of historical culture is necessary in order to imagine a productive present and future. It is the dislocation of linear time that becomes most relevant for this discussion of

Afrofuturism: the use of the past in disrupting both the present and the future while avoiding essentialism. To further understand where Afrofuturism sits in relation to a discussion on references to historical African art in the curriculum let us briefly look at how others define Afrofuturism and its temporal aspects.

In his seminal text, Kodwo Eshun (2003), writes on Afrofuturism's intentional and necessary dislocation of time as an attempt to create both counter-memories and counter-futures to contest the colonial archive. Eshun points to the way in which science fiction and proleptic art is intertwined in power struggles only too urgently applicable to Africa: '[t]he powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past. The present moment is stretching, slipping for some into yesterday, reaching for others into tomorrow' (Eshun 2003). Afrofuturism is, in this sense, a method by which to counter both the negative future predicted for Africa as well as the absent history falsely declared by Hegel and countless other colonial texts. In continuing this notion, when artists use Afrofuturism as a framework they can be said to be employing a 'chronopolitical intervention' within the dimension of the 'anticipatory and the future conditional' (Eshun 2003:292-293). Afrofuturism's adjustment of temporal logic is related by Mark Fisher (2013) to music and Derrida's concept of hauntology, which describes a temporal, historical and ontological disjunction. In this sense, Fisher emphasises the way in which Afrofuturism dissolves linear time as it sees time as 'plastic, stretchable and prophetic … a technologized time, in which past and future are subject to ceaseless de-and recomposition' (Fisher 2013:47). Here, then, is a nod to the specific way in which Afrofuturism uses the past: in a manner that dismisses the view of the past as static, whole and authentic. In direct opposition to a colonial discourse that forces African culture and history to occupy a narrow and falsely authentic space in the distant past, Afrofuturism, as Fisher puts it, maintains a tension with a 'lack of origin' that defines the difference between hauntology and postmodernism (Fisher 2013:48). In reference to music, Fisher's argument is that Afrofuturism and hauntology make reference to historical recordings by emphasising the recording surface and its 'crackle' (Fisher 2013:48). For visual material, this may mean that if postmodernism picks references to history in an *ad hoc* and superficial manner then it is Afrofuturism's method to reference in a way that makes one aware of the context of the reference and of the spectral quality of its historical cultural form.

This temporal dislocation with an embedded acknowledgement of the past may be, then, what it is about the method that Afrofuturism employs to reference an African cultural past that allows it to avoid, for the most part, accusations of postmodern cultural appropriation. The term 'decolonisation' may share similarities with this aspect of Afrofuturism in that it makes reference to historical injustice (colonisation) with the

cultural and temporal dislocation that is engendered. Decolonisation ostensibly tries to describe a process of addressing and dismantling that history and its affect in the present and future. In the contemporary moment, the term decolonisation has become pertinent to academia and popular culture in a manner that requests particular meanings from the term. Decolonisation as a concept has, for those who subscribe to its call, connotations of renewal, emancipation and the positive release from cultural dominance. The protests against student fee increases under the banner of *Fees Must Fall*, which succeeded in having a statue of British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes removed on 9 April 2015 from the University of Cape Town (UCT), were catalysed by the South African decolonisation movement referred to as *Rhodes Must Fall* (#rhodesmustfall). The use of decolonisation as a term, is often perceived in the contemporary sense as an alternative to the term "postcolonial" and may be seen as part of a global awareness of colonial culture in the present despite the demise of the official institution of European colonisation (Grosfoguel 2011). Since the "postcolonial" assumes an era and ideological moment that has moved past and beyond the colonial, the use of the term, "decolonial" (or, at times "anti-colonial") forces an acknowledgment of the continued presence of the colonial in contemporary space. In this sense, decolonisation may be said to be employing an acknowledgement of a temporal dislocation in a manner somewhat akin to Afrofuturism. Ostensibly, the verb 'to decolonise' is defined only as the withdrawal of a colonial power so that it is left, politically, independent (Rothermund 2006:2). For those who call for decolonisation in the South African context such a definition is perceived to be inadequate as it does not account for the ongoing economic, cultural, ideological and historical impact of colonisation on contemporary nation states. The insufficiency of terms such a "democratic", "independent" or "postcolonial" in describing the complexity of lived experience in a country like South Africa (which historically has had a relatively large European, settler population) is emphasised in the contemporary use of the term "decolonisation".[1] In his well-known text *Decolonizing the mind* (1986) the Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1994:3) draws attention to what he calls the 'cultural bomb' of imperialism that effects an annihilation of heritage, language and culture to the extent that the colonised person sees their own history as lacking. For wa Thiong'o, the effects of the cultural bomb are not lifted with independence, or in the case of South Africa, democracy. The absorption of an imperial ideology that demotes African culture and privileges European culture is maintained despite political independence. It is from this basis that academic disciplines, such as art history, may be perceived to require decolonisation. As such, despite the discourse that frames African states as "postcolonial" in the twenty-first century, the employment of the term "decolonisation" can still be said to have both literal and metaphorical weight. To continue the discussion of hauntology, used by Fisher in reference to Afrofuturism, one may argue that decolonisation

begins with the premise that the past continues to have an effect on the present or is affected by the spectre of the past.

Like many revolutionary terms, it has historically been used to describe situations that are far from emancipatory and it is the term's particular use in its current context that must be emphasised rather than the term in a generic sense. As Suren Pillay noted in a talk at the University of Cape Town in April 2015, for example, the National Party used the term decolonisation during apartheid to describe the removal of black people into Bantustans as a process supposedly analogous to the decolonisation of other African nations (Pillay 2015). In contemporary South Africa, however, the term decolonisation has sought to refer to the transformation of space, epistemology and ideology from one dominated and created by the Anglo-American/western European to one resonating with the non-west, the global south or, most specifically, an localised Afrocentric vision.[2] The vision of decolonisation is posited as having particular relevance to the university space. This arena is seen, for scholars such as Ramon Grosfoguel (2011:74), as a globalised institutional space that perpetuates the canon of westernised thought and therefore requires a decolonisation of knowledge.

In the South African context, the focus of decolonisation has been on transformation and access to education. The student movements of 2015 shifted the focus from a problem of physical access to an epistemological access: the view that the content of university curricula in South Africa displays a colonial bias and as such creates a sense of dislocation between students, context and content. Importantly this shift was able to link two strands of enduring discontent that otherwise existed in distinct ideological spaces. Under the umbrella of transformation, Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and national mandates for diversity[3] the central aim appeared to be providing physical access to university spaces for black students and staff. The student-led movements that began with *Rhodes Must Fall*, however, connected physical transformation with epistemological decolonisation. The epistemological decolonisation that is being spoken of specifically aims to insert a greater focus on African knowledge systems into the curricula as both a means and a result of physical, demographic transformation.

For the disciplines of visual studies and art history this means, for many, a focus on contemporary and historical African art; yet, as a result of our settler colonial and apartheid past, there has been and still is a dearth of African content in the curricula at South African universities. The curriculums of art history (what has transformed into visual studies in many cases) taught at South African universities have shown, overall, a relative lack of teaching on historical African art and there is a great push to change this situation. While some institutions, such as the University of the Witwatersrand, have included this historical material since the 1970s there is still a

predominant focus on western forms or on African art from the contemporary or modern period. This state of affairs exists as a result of a complex set of factors that I briefly outline in what follows.

Art history as taught in South Africa in the apartheid period was most predominantly perceived as a support subject to Fine Art or practical art production (Nettleton 2006:40). Stellenbosch University, for example, established its Fine Art department in 1963 but only opened a formal post for an art historian in 1996. Prior to this, Fine Art staff taught art history without specialist training in the discipline and this in part accounts for the curricula's derivative nature in the early years of its existence (Nettleton 2006:54-55). During this period, the curriculum at South African Universities followed an approach modelled on European Universities. Victor Honey, a previous head of Fine Art at Stellenbosch University, notes that very little historical or contemporary African art was taught in the art historical curricula at Stellenbosch in the early years of its establishment (Honey 1986:161-121; Nettleton 2006:54-55). For many years in the latter part of the twentieth century contemporary South African art was taught but there was almost no teaching on historical African art. Somewhat ironically, students from the department of Ancient Studies were brought to the Fine Art's department to look at the replicas of ancient Egyptian art up until the 1980s but African art was not part of the art history curriculum (Cornelius 2015). This provides an example of the historical denial of African material's status as "art" rather than "artefact" that was common on a global scale. The Department of Ancient Studies sought to introduce their students to north-African (Egyptian) examples as historical artefacts but these were not studied in the department in which they were housed because they were not classified as art. When Sandra Klopper was appointed in 2002 she introduced a greater focus on Africa and some sections on art outside of the western canon; though this tended to look at contemporary or modern art since, it may be argued, historical African material's categorisation as "art" was still debated.

Another consideration in the state of African art in the curriculum has been the move away from the disciplinary boundaries of art history towards visual studies. In the second decade of the twenty-first century the art history course at Stellenbosch University was renamed as Visual Studies. In keeping with a move away from art history, in recent years critical theory as well as contemporary art and visual culture has been the focus (Stellenbsoch University Visual Arts Department, n.d.). At the University of Pretoria, a historically white Afrikaans-medium institution, the department is also now referred to as the Department of Visual Arts and offers BA degrees in Fine Arts, Information Design and Visual Studies. In the apartheid and early post-apartheid period very little African art history was taught at the University of Pretoria with much of the research into historical southern African art having been the domain of other

departments such as anthropology where the material again had the status of artefact rather than art (Nettleton 2006:54-55). In the early part of the twenty-first century most of the research conducted by staff in this department focused on contemporary South African art by either black or white artists. Between at least 1995 and 2009, two subjects were offered to students: visual communication and art history. In the art history module there was still a large focus on western, European art and north-American art. Once the department shifted away from art history towards visual studies the curricula began to concentrate far more on popular culture. The visual studies course booklet from 2015 describes the discipline of visual studies as engaging with a wide range of visual material from 'billboards, TV screens, in cinemas, magazines, newspapers, on the Internet, fashion, architecture and in malls' (University of Pretoria Visual Arts Department 2015) and as such falls in line with a move away from the narrower range of material traditionally grouped under the term art towards a broader range of examples from visual culture.[4] In drawing on the broad range of material available for study under Visual Studies, the courses focus predominantly on examples from the contemporary moment or the modernity of the twentieth century. This move towards the contemporary, facilitated through the disciplinary shift away from art history towards visual studies, can be seen at most South African Universities. Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape, for example, offers courses in what it calls 'Art History and Visual Culture' (Nettleton 2006:51). While it was noted in 2000 that no African art was taught in the art history courses at Rhodes University there is now some focus on African art but this is also largely contemporary (Nettleton 2006:51). Current courses (as of 2017) begin with a focus on visual culture in first year with lectures on 'film, clothing, advertising, performance and carnivals' as well as museum practice (Rhodes University n.d.). In the second year of the course, students look at Modernism and Postmodernism with a focus on western art movements such as Pop Art, though with some attention given to topics such as 'African Modernism' (Rhodes University n.d.). The third year course is structured around the theme of 'Art, Society and Power' and looks at some contemporary South African content through topics such as protest art and issues around race and identity (Rhodes University n.d.).

The move towards visual studies and towards contemporary South African art as primary subject matter has meant that in some cases there has been a decline rather than an increase in historical African art content. The factors involved in this decrease and dearth of the historical include the favouring of the contemporary and the tendency to focus on a broad range of material rather than the kind of specific subject matter focused upon in art history that would allow for modules dedicated to historical African art. This has in large part to do with underfunded departments whose staff members are required to be generalists rather than specialists. Another element mentioned above is the fact that for institutions that offer practical courses in design (rather than

the traditional 'Fine Art') in South Africa, art history is often perceived to be an inappropriately narrow discipline for these students (since design has been perceived as distinct from 'art') and visual studies is preferred. Furthermore, as is the case with many South African art history or visual studies departments, understaffing means that most often no choice is offered to students in modules and all students take the same modules each year. This also means that modules reflect lecturer's individual research interests and so are not chronological or structured in a way that can create a broad overview of global art history or even art history specifically applicable to the African continent. It also implies that courses are more easily maintained over the years as lecturers to some extent teach what was taught to them in an ancestral line of South African art historians that goes back to their predecessor's postgraduate study in Europe and the countries settler-colonial past.

In summary, I would argue that there are two major concerns in the decolonisation of art history and visual studies curricula in South Africa. Firstly, that there is a relative lack of African content in the curriculum and secondly that when this material has been included it is most often contemporary African art that fits easily within the global sphere (a sphere with roots in western-European art history). As mentioned above, this can in part be attributed to the small, underfunded departments at South African universities that do not allow for lecturing specialisation but instead demand that academics be generalists capable of teaching a broad range of subjects. Specialists in historical African art and culture are few and far between and can at times be found in departments outside of art history or visual studies.[5] Academics with knowledge of contemporary African art are most often specialists in visual studies and the contemporary art market and as such do not also possess expertise in historical African art (the material that would have been labelled as artefacts in the past). For many years, Anitra Nettleton at the University of the Witwatersrand (now also at the University of Johannesburg) was one of the few South African academics working in historical African art.[6]

Looking at the content included in visual studies curricula at South African Universities, we can see that while there is still a large focus on western theory and methodology there is a degree of focus on contemporary African art and visual culture. Students may, for example, study the work of South African photographer Zanele Muholi, the fashion design of South African Laduma Ngxokolo or the installations of Nicholas Hlobo, Yinka Shonibare and El Anutsui. These artist's work is typically studied through the lens of gender studies, postcolonial theory or the history of installation art in the west rather than with a conceptual link to historical African art or material culture. In an African studies or Anthropology course, on the other hand, a South African student might, with a nod to the field's anthropological beginnings, study historical African

forms in relation to their cultural, philosophical or religious context.[7] In other cases within the discipline of African studies the historical material culture or art of African societies is hardly studied at all and instead students engage in critical discussion on the ways in which Africa is perceived by the west, political and economic concerns as well as the nuances of decolonial thought.[8] In very few instances, however, are the conceptual frameworks of historical African art forms perceived as influencing contemporary forms in the manner in which they are taught.

This dearth of historical African material is, in large part, a reaction to South Africa's colonial past. In the South African context references to historical African art and culture have a history that is fraught. Ethnographic photography, anthropological catalogues and racist museum displays were the primary way in which historical work was referenced during the colonial and apartheid periods. As such, there appears to have been a rejection of such references in the early post-apartheid period and an acute awareness of the dangers of cultural appropriation. In the contemporary moment, however, an increasing number of young practitioners are making proud references to historical African art and culture in a manner quite apart from that which may be labelled cultural appropriation or ethnographic study. For popular culture, fashion and design the mandate to decolonise in the post-apartheid, postcolonial moment has also seen an increase in references to African aesthetics and African cultural forms. This "cultural decolonisation" is an attempt to move away from all that is perceived to be western, European or colonial in favour of references to historical and contemporary African art and visual culture. Cultural appropriation, on the other hand, is most often defined as 'the taking – from a culture that is not one's own, of intellectual property, cultural expressions of artefacts, history and ways of knowing' (Ziff & Rao 1997:1). In discussions of cultural appropriation, in relation to popular culture, there is very often a disagreement on when phenomena has crossed over from cultural reference in the postmodern sense to appropriation. Even in the academic sphere, we struggle to allow Roland Barthes's accepted assertion that the author – god is dead and that the text is a 'tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable sources of culture' to sit concurrently with the knowledge, in the sense of Foucault, that power imbalances necessitate that some cultural forms be off limits to the postmodern tendency for free reference and quotation (Barthes 1984, in Culler 1983:71). This difficulty lies to some extent in the definition that first requires we understand what qualifies as culture, what qualifies as 'one's own culture' and what, if anything, lies outside of the arena of cultural expression or knowledge: what is sacred and what is open source. Yet, perhaps the most important part of cultural appropriation's definition is that it refers to an act of taking that has connotations of stealing which makes the term at once an accusation and not a neutral attribution. The term also refers to the use or "stealing" of culture or identity in a manner that reduces complexity that essentialises in order

to use superficially. Cultural appropriation may be seen when culture is appropriated for commercial gain within the global capitalist system as we see most obviously in the realm of tourism and its rampant appropriation and fetishisation of visual culture in South Africa. Decolonisation as a term has, on the other hand, connotations of renewal, emancipation and the positive release from cultural dominance. Importantly, in relation to the discussion on decolonised curricula, it is a concern of ownership and the status of historical African material that becomes debated when such material is included. In a sense, this concern is temporal; it is rooted in the notion that there is something potentially inappropriate about referencing a cultural or artistic past in the present, specifically if that past is marred by cultural power imbalances. It is that temporal aspect that I want to extend into the discussion of *Black Panther* that follows.

My question then becomes: to what extent can the same temporal dislocation be applied to *Black Panther* and to what extent may the terms Afrofuturism and decolonisation be applied to the film? *Black Panther* is considered to employ Afrofuturism as method because it references both contemporary and historical forms of African culture as material for a futuristic narrative: the 'prosthetically enhanced future' that Dery (1994:180) mentions where perhaps the past may be seen as the prosthesis in the analogy. Yet, the comic form of *Black Panther* on which the film is based was not perceived as uncontroversial. In an article that discusses the comic *Fantastic Four #52-53* (July-August 1966), which premiered the character of *Black Panther* as Marvel's first black superhero, Martin Lund argues that the character must be read 'as an example of 'white on black' representation, or white images of blacks centered on white interests, filtered through Marvel's then-prevalent *Cold War* focus' that is heavily Americanised (Lund 2016:1). Lund goes on to critique the character and the representation of *Wakanda* as simplistic and a rhetorical alleviation of the West's fear that newly independent African nations would align themselves with communism rather than the political ideals of the West (Lund 2016). Yet other commentators, such as Adilifu Nama, see the comic form of *Black Panther* as revolutionary and anticolonial: 'T'Challa [*Black Panther*] performs exemplary symbolic work as a recuperative figure and majestic signifier of the best of the black anticolonialist movement' (Nama 2011:43-44). For Lund, citing others, *Black Panther* as comic rests on too many negative African stereotypes: a tribal kingdom with a desirable natural resource, a mysterious jungle setting, the trope of a history-less *terra nullius* 'ripe for white interference' (Pieterse 1992:35, in Lund 2016:13). Lund (2016:14) further emphasises his critique by pointing out that the 'tribe' in *Wakanda* 'is populated by people wearing loincloths and animal headdresses' who 'communicate through drums' and 'celebrate through traditional dances'.

It is on this point that I would like to rest in order to pose a question: is there something intrinsic to animal headdresses, drums and dances that is "primitive" and derogatory

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Screen shot from *Black Panther*, showing religious practices ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

or is it rather the perception of such cultural practices that renders it such through fear both of their power and their link to racism? How is it that some references to such cultural and religious practices can be read as offensive cultural appropriation while others are, as has most commonly been the case with the film version of *Black Panther*, seen as a powerful celebration? For Lund and others who reference the earlier comic form, for example, the fact that the character of *Black Panther* gains his powers by eating herbs and undergoing ritual practices is 'atavistic' in a negative sense while for Nama the use of the 'mysterious and metaphysical' is quite literally a powerful weapon (Lund 2016:21; Nama 2011:43). I argue that it is a matter of perception and a manner of use that allows 'traditional' religious practices to be perceived as powerful and in fact futuristic. Rituals, particularly those that employ metaphysical elements such as the ability to speak to ancestors, to shift time and place and the transformation of physical environments are at once common in both historical and contemporary African cultural practices as well as possessing futuristic elements commonly seen in science fiction films and discussed in contemporary science. In this sense, cultural practices and religious rituals need not be seen as divorced from

FIGURE **Nº 2**   ‹

Screen shot from *Black Panther*, showing the leader of the River Tribe's lip plate. ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

modernity but can in fact be perceived as forms of technology. Ghanaian-American author and blogger, Malaka Grant, raises a similar point in her praise of *Black Panther*'s recent film iteration. She notes that a largely white audience in South Africa sniggered at the leader of the River Tribe's lip plate and asks: '[w]hat is it about lip plates, or piercings or even dread locks that is so threatening to those to adhere to European beauty standards? It's a question that we are still grappling with today: In what ways do the visual presentation and celebration of my culture interfere with my competency?' (Grant 2018:3). For Grant, then, the reference to a lip plate in *Black Panther* is not an example of cultural appropriation or essentialism but rather of African fashion and beauty. Such a practice may be viewed as traditional and therefore atavistic, but it is in fact also contemporary and, through the River Tribe elder's styling by costume designer Ruth Carter with a colourful suit, *Black Panther* turns this apparent "tradition" into an example of Afrofuturistic fashion.

It seems there are a number of characteristics of the method used by *Black Panther* (2018) to reference African cultural practices that allows it to be viewed as Afrofuturistic and empowering rather than another example of cultural appropriation. Firstly, the "traditional" elements or cultural practices are combined with contemporary and

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Screen shot from *Black Panther*, showing architecture referencing Ndebele painting style. ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

futuristic ones so that African culture is depicted as dynamic, global and varied rather than static and homogenous. Architecturally, for example, the buildings in *Wakanda* combine historical elements (such as thatched roofs or hand-painted walls) with contemporary ones (tall glass walls and roof-top gardens) for a futuristic effect (Malkin 2018:5). This combination of historical, contemporary and futuristic elements is what defines Afrofuturism as practice and it may also be a characteristic that allows references to historical African culture to avoid essentialism and cultural appropriation. In some sense, this perspective simply offers a clearer view on African history that is not marred by colonial discourse: an Africa that has had global connections for centuries and whose cultures have always been dynamic and technological. As noted by Gus Casely-Hayford (director of the *Smithsonian National Museum of African Art*) *Black Panther* creates a 'sense of African ideas flowing across geography … of ancient beliefs inspiring futuristic technologies … African cultures remain dynamic, this is a

FIGURE **Nº 4**

Screen shot from *Black Panther*, showing futuristic architecture in Wakanda. ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

continent exploding with ideas that have inspired intra-continental and global thinking' (Spengler & Sayler 2018:5). If we are to return to the earlier discussion of Afrofuturism then we may argue that the reference to African belief systems maintains a memory of the "recorded surface", the "crackle" or the spectre of an African past in a manner that does not attempt to reduce the reference to a digestible, distinguishable part.

What may allow the particular kind of Afrofuturism employed in *Black Panther* to read as a celebration rather than a cultural appropriation is that it creates a fantasy vision of what is possible while remaining rooted to an understanding of historical cultural forms. The creation of aspirational forms within contemporary film is nothing unusual but it may be perceived as such in the arena of Hollywood's depictions of black Americans and Africans. Tre Johnson (2018:5) notes that, within the Hollywood film industry, the black narrative has been 'invested in black Americans primarily as slaves (*12 Years a Slave*), victims of inner-city strife (*Detroit*), or symbols of comfort (*The Help*)' which implies that black experience can only depicted when it is 'intertwined in some way with the white experience'. The success of *Black Panther*'s Afrofuturistic method, then, is the centring of black American and particularly African culture in a manner that pays homage to it and is aspirational by not allowing it to exist in a historical vacuum.

Another element in the methodological success of *Black Panther*'s Afrofuturism is the reference to specific, existing and historical cultural forms that were researched for

FIGURE **Nº 5**   ‹

Screen shot from *Black Panther*, showing references to Basotho fashion. ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

the film rather than plucked from imagined scenes of a homogenous Africa. *Black Panther* references, amongst other things, Basotho blankets from South Africa; Nsibidi script from Nigeria; Ndebele gold rings and painting from South Africa; OvaHimba hair styles from Namibia; Zulu headdresses from South Africa; Maasai warriors from Kenya and Tanzania; female, seventeenth-century Dahomey warriors from present-day Benin; Kente cloth from Ghana; Mursi and Suri lip plates from Ethiopia and South Sudan; Tuareg jewellery from Algeria, Niger and Mali; Igbo masks from Nigeria; Dogon masked performances from Mali. One would think that such a mixture of references to African culture would result in the critique of homogenisation. Yet, instead the film's references to African culture had audiences dressing in African fashion for screenings and cheering when recognisable cultures were depicted. As Johnson (2018:4) notes, the film has come at a time when pride in black culture is increasing globally and has 'inspired everything from *Black Panther*-themed watch parties to a voter registration initiative to a curriculum that encourages educators to leverage the film to teach deeper histories about African culture, politics, and history'.

This brings me to another element in the particular success of *Black Panther*'s use of Afrofuturism: the assurance that both the producers and consumers of the film

were intended to be those who shared pride in African culture. For Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1992:10), the reception and positioning of representational practices is inextricably linked to the intention behind their creation (production) and the manner of their consumption. At every turn, *Black Panther* (2018) appears to have been produced by those who wish to champion African people and culture and it is this aspect that appears to set it apart from its earlier comic version. Camille Friend, who was in charge of hair design for the movie aimed to create a 'totally Afrocentric, natural hair movie' that emphasises 'a moment when people are feeling empowered about being black' (Martin 2018:2). The comic script for *Black Panther* (2018) was written by Ta-Nehesi Coates who is an author and journalist renowned for his socio-political commentary on race.

As such, *Black Panther* can be said to make use of an Afrofuturistic method that is able to reference both historical and contemporary African culture without entering the realm of cultural appropriation. The film's producers attempted to involve young African artists and designers in the creation of the film and in its offshoots. The film's costume designer, for example, was inspired by the fashion design of South African Laduma Ngxokolo's *Maxhosa* knitwear (Chutel & Kazeem 2018). Laduma Ngxokolo's *MaXhosa* knitwear range began with the desire to create 'a modern Xhosa-inspired knitwear collection that would be suitable for *amakrwala*, who are prescribed by tradition to dress up in new dignified formal clothing for six months after their manhood initiation' (Laduma Ngxokolo [sa]). Ngxokolo is himself a *Xhosa* man who has undergone the initiation journey and decided to reference historical *Xhosa* beadwork aesthetics in the creation of his designs. There are multiple ways in which we could describe and interpret Ngxokolo's designs and the *MaXhosa* range. Commentators might critically see the design as the appropriation of *Xhosa* aesthetics for superficial commercial use while others may describe them as the transference of design from *Xhosa* beadwork and historical dress into the realm of contemporary western fashion that decreases its claim to cultural authenticity. It is the latter reading which assumes the well-known assumption that non-western phenomena should occupy a space of the static past while the western is provided the privilege of change and contemporaneity. Therein lies the change in perception that allows for a reference to historical cultural forms to become empowering: that the historical forms themselves are perceived as dynamic so that a reference to them in combination with the contemporary does not provide a binary contradiction between tradition and modernity, but rather a continuation of dynamic cultural forms across time. This method we may call Afrofuturistic.

It is this methodological Afrofuturism that employs references to the past and refuses to allow the historical to be seen as statically atavistic that is of relevance to the decolonisation of curricula. When studying contemporary African fashion, for example,

this is studied as a separate phenomenon to the diverse range of historical African fashion forms as these are more easily defined as "dress" with connotations of stasis and homogeneity. The distinction between the terms 'fashion' and 'dress', elucidated by Entwistle (2000) as often defining the western contemporary on the one hand and the non-western historical on the other may be perceived, conceptually, as similar to the constructed conceptual distinction between 'art' and 'traditional craft' historically used to separate western objects from their African (or generally non-western) counterparts. Here, these conceptual distinctions have been used in the study of art and visual culture from a western perspective (which is, as described above, also relevant to settler colonial contexts) to separate both the western (art) from the African (artefact) and the historical from the contemporary. If, however, we shatter this entrenched dichotomy and allow contemporary African fashion to be seen as deriving from historical forms we may look at the contemporary as a manifestation of an existing African aesthetic system rather than as a form moving away from "tradition" through the influence of the west. A similar line of argument may be applied to contemporary African art. By employing Afrofuturism as method *Black Panther* may in turn be described as contributing to the project of decolonisation. As Afrofuturism makes use of the past to disrupt the present and to create a future imaginary so does the decolonial, in something of a reversal, seek to change the present and future by acknowledging and disrupting the power of the past.

To conclude, I began this paper with an analysis of Afrofuturism and the manner in which it disrupts temporal logic by creating both counter-memories and counter-futures by fantastically projecting historical forms onto the future (Eshun 2003). I then looked at the call to decolonise art and visual culture in the curriculum and discussed the ways in which *Black Panther*'s use of Afrofuturism can be perceived as a methodology that allows for references to historical African culture without entering the problematic sphere of cultural appropriation. This methodology may be characterised by the combination of historical, contemporary and futuristic elements that reference specific cultural forms in a manner that centres black experience and is keenly aware of the fluid nature of both the past and the present. It is also a method where the intention behind the production and consumption of representations is vital, where an aspirational future is created that allows for a vision of what is possible and where young artists and designers are included in the production of the cultural form. If this Afrofuturistic method is translated into the academic sphere and used in teaching then it may prove useful in the project of decolonisation. That would entail structuring courses on African art and culture that make reference to historical forms in dynamic relation to the contemporary; that reference African culture on its own terms without always relating it back to western forms; where the intention behind the production

of course material is the positive empowerment of African culture and where young artist's opinions and work is included in the discussion. To do that would be to employ something akin to *Black Panther*'s Afrofuturistic method in the project of decolonisation.

Notes

1. While the description of "settler" is in part misleading considering the many South Africans (particularly Afrikaans speakers) classified as "white" who have a combination of European, African and Asian ancestry and a loss of identification with Europe, it is useful here as a term to describe an historical structure of separation rather than individual's identities. Achille Mbembe rejects the contemporary use of the term "settler" for white South Africans as it assumes a lack of responsibility for citizens tied to the nation. See Achille Mbembe, 2015. I acknowledge this complexity and seek to use the term "settler" in reference to historical structure and apartheid policy only.

2. The terminology used to define these geographical and epistemological spaces is fraught. In their recent book *Decoloniality: concepts, analytics, praxis* Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018:2) refer to concepts originating in 'Western Europe and the Anglo United States' as a way of locating colonial thought in specific locals.

3. Diversity is a term connected to transformation in institutional discourse that many feel is likened to the metaphor of the rainbow nation and as such fails to acknowledge inequality and difference.

4. The broad nature of visual studies as a discipline is also described as interdisciplinary in nature and as drawing on the disciplines of 'Art History, Cultural Studies, Media and Film Studies, Aesthetics, Visual Anthropology, Material Culture Studies and Philosophy'.

5. See, for example, the profiles of a Professor in the Ancient Studies department at Stellenbosch University (https://www.sun.ac.za/english/faculty/arts/ancient—studies/staff/lecturers/izak—cornelius) and that of and professor with a degree in Anthropology and expertise in beadwork (https://www.kznsagallery.co.za/artists/kate_wells.htm)

6. Please see: https://www.uj.ac.za/contact/Pages/Anitra—Nettleton.aspx

7. See, for example, the courses for undergraduate students at the University of Cape Town's Anthropology Department: http://www.anthropology.uct.ac.za/san/undergraduate—studies

8. See, for example, the postgraduate African Studies course at the University of Cape Town: http://www.africanstudies.uct.ac.za/cas/academic/postgrad/2018

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