Complications and concessions: ecofeminism in *Black Panther*

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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary movement which dissects unhealthy power relations. Assessing the science fiction film *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) through an ecofeminist lens offers up fruitful and complicated explorations. Ecofeminism focusses on the impacts of toxic hegemonies, and the paper evaluates representations of power in *Black Panther*. As the vibranium meteor gives Wakanda an advantage, vibranium functions as a speculative symbol for privilege, and the responsibilities that come with the power of privileged positioning are interrogated. An analysis of the representations of culture and nature in *Black Panther* potentially indicates that Wakanda is not as severed from nature as our contemporary global neoliberal culture – although, arguably, much of the imagery is idealised, and what is excluded from our view is as important as what is included. An uninvited ecofeminist observation suggests that Wakanda's isolation goes against the grain of contemporary globalised neoliberalism and posits that self-reliance and self-subsistence can be a powerful alternative force. In our neoliberal system, where deregulated global trade is driving the Anthropocene, there is potentially a lesson in Wakanda's self-sufficiency. Finally, a discussion of the heart-shaped herb reveals it to be a speculative symbol of ecofeminist connectivity through uniting humanity, nature, technology, and consciousness.

Keywords: *Black Panther,* ecofeminism, privilege, Anthropocene, neoliberalism, entanglement.

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Introduction: ecofeminism and the entanglement of the 'dominant, emergent and residual'

Through an analysis of hegemonic oppressions, ecofeminism makes clear the linkage between patriarchal neoliberalism and its destructive effect on planetary ecologies (including animals, plant life and ecosystems) and non-dominant human groups. Ecofeminism addresses humanity's relationship to the nexus of ecological systems that support life on earth, and posits that the roots of the climate emergency can be found in humanity's nature-culture split. Our contemporary neoliberal capitalist system views nature as a resource to be mined, extracted, controlled, manipulated and repressed in service to the economy (run by the stock marketeers), and ecofeminism advocates that this global commodification of every aspect of life is propelling the Anthropocene. Ecofeminism is a rich theoretical field with a diversity of theorists exploring different strands of ecofeminism – there is thus no single ecofeminism.[1] Whilst acknowledging the complexity of the varieties of ecofeminisms in operation, Greta Gaard's (1993:1) definition encapsulates the ecofeminism engaged in this article:

> Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature. Its theoretical base is a sense of self most commonly expressed by women and various other nondominant groups – a self that is interconnected with all life.

As interconnectedness is core to ecofeminist theory, it is an interdisciplinary movement that draws on a myriad of fields from the arts to zoology, and engages in both theorising and embodied activism.

As ecofeminism is concerned with toxic power and oppression, the paper pivots around the issue of power in *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) through exploring privilege and inaction, isolationism, representations of culture and nature, as well as issues of multiculturalism. Finally, a discussion of the heart-shaped herb reveals it to be a speculative symbol of ecofeminist connectivity.

Cultural artefacts can be important forms of activism, and many reviewers and viewers have celebrated the Afrofuturist Hollywood superhero film *Black Panther* as a significant

work of activism. The film has been lionised for its headlining black cast, strong female characters, and positive representation of Africa. While there is much to celebrate in *Black Panther*, this article suggests that an ecofeminist analysis of this cultural artefact reveals potent complications that allow us to deepen our understanding of the contradictions – and uncertainties – operating within the contemporary neoliberal cultural environment which gave rise to Coogler's iconic blockbuster film.

The film has been subject to varying interpretations, for instance, Robert A. Saunders (2019:144) considers the myriad African identities represented in Wakanda as 'all over the place', while Danielle Becker (2019) suggests that this multitude of representations is a powerful disruption of the present through the Afrofuturist celebration of the African pasts in this futurist vision. *Black Panther* has been seen by some as propagating an alt-right neoliberal agenda – as discussed by Scott J. Varda and Leslie A. Hahner (2020), and yet many have seen the film as exhibiting progressive representations of black, African and female identities (Faramelli 2019, Smith 2018, Williams 2018:27) – representations that do not align with alt-right attitudes. The robust theoretical debates around the film have themselves become a chimeric site for the hopes and anxieties of this contemporary cultural neoliberal moment, and this contradictory theoretical site throbs with the complexity of what Sarah Nuttall (2009:1) refers to as entanglement: '[e]ntanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited'. These entanglements are complex, challenging, obnoxious, and even potentially enriching and inspiring. Nuttall (2009:1) expands on her concept:

> [entanglement] is a means by which to draw into our analyses those sites in which what was once thought of as separate – identities, spaces, histories – come together or find points of intersection in unexpected ways. It is an idea which signals largely unexplored terrains of mutuality, wrought from a common, though often coercive and confrontational, experience.

That the film is a site of entanglement is not surprising. It functions, for instance, as both a critique of hegemonic representations: positive African role models and muscular, martially inclined women, as well as a vehicle for neoliberal fantasies: glorifications of violence and techno-utopianism. It is a Marvel Studios film after all, and is a product of the gargantuan Hollywood factory of representation: 'it is clear that our dreams are often curtailed through a lack of representation. Diversity of stories on our screens, means a diversity of dreams encouraged' (Kerrigan 2018:[Sp]). This is not to imply that Hollywood never produces films that challenge hegemonic representations, but most blockbuster Hollywood films tend to lead with white actors and are for the most part directed by white men (Smith, Choueiti, Pieper, Case & Choi 2018).

Influenced by Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony, cultural studies theorist Raymond Williams (1977:121) proposes that cultural hegemonic negotiation takes place in a triptych of contestation: dominant, residual and emergent. According to Williams (1977), the dominant hegemonic force contains elements of residual cultural resonances, and is challenged by the emergent cultural ideals. Williams (1977) purports that the dominant hegemony in a society operates by incorporating some of residual social elements – for example, pagan practices were absorbed into Christianity. Emergent trends challenge the dominant – and these are often absorbed into the dominant – for instance, blues music was originally positioned as the music of slaves, and yet blues music has paved the way for many genres of modern music.

In *Black Panther*, this negotiation can be seen to play out in the following ways: the dominant hegemonic narrative reveals how Wakanda shakes off its isolationism and engages with its global responsibilities, the residual can be seen through the integration of African traditional clothing and architecture into an Afrofuturist aesthetic, and the emergent is characterised by the mainstream Hollywood superhero film headlined by black actors with black creatives in key positions: director Ryan Coogler, scriptwriters Coogler and Joe Robert Cole, production designer Hannah Beachler, as well as costume designer Ruth E. Carter.

In this article, I will be lensing the ecofeminist discussion of *Black Panther* through both Sarah Nuttall's theory of entanglement, as well as Raymond Williams's theory of the dominant, residual and emergent. In the knotty entanglements of the dominant, emergent and residual negotiations in the film, there are some residual and emergent – and I would argue even some inadvertent – positions and representations in the film that offer themselves up for fruitful ecofeminist explorations. These inadvertent representations, in terms of Nuttall's theory of entanglement, allow for some 'uninvited' Nuttall (2009:1) observations I will be making, using the film as a springboard for ecofeminist philo-sophising and activism.

Geography as fate: privilege and inaction

Black Panther's plot hinges on how T'Challa, 'a good man with a good heart' (Coogler 2018 00:32:34) navigates the ethical terrain of power. As Wakanda was not colonised, it operates outside of history and thus did not fall victim to the colonial plundering and post-liberation catastrophes that devastated most African nations – nor was it one of the countries that benefited from colonial pillaging. Speculative elements in literature and films allow for new imaginings as well as reimaginings. Through their inversions of the status quo, speculative devices can allow for questions in

contemporary society to be encoded in new ways, and can invigorate old questions that still challenge societies, with new life.

Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously said: 'geography is fate' (Saunders 2019:144), and this is played out in the speculative Wakanda.[2] The propitious vibranium meteor endows Wakanda with great power, and to safeguard this power the nation turned inward and isolated itself from the rest of the world: 'Wakanda is a fortress that defends against history' (Williams 2018:28), and the film's ethical thrust is lensed on the question of the responsibility that comes with this immense power. T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) is the film's flawed hero, and through him we witness the archetypal battle of tradition versus change. T'Challa initially reveals himself to be a leader who will follow in the defensive footsteps of his ancestral forbears and continue to safeguard Wakanda's secret power and prosperity through its shrewd isolation. However, his love interest, Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o), has other ambitions for Wakanda, as does Erik Killmonger (Mickael B. Jordan), and through a combination of Nakia's ethical diplomacy and Erik Killmonger's violent – but self-righteous – stratagems, T'Challa is forced to confront his responsibilities as a person of power.

By making Wakanda guilty of what many contemporary powerful nation states do: ignore the plight of poorer nations, the film offers commentary on contemporary global politics. Creating a mirror narrative of a Wakanda that ultimately redeems itself at the film's conclusion, is a direct challenge to relatively affluent global north nation states (ironically with mainly white leaders and parliaments) to consider their responsibilities to poorer nations. This is an urgent matter with regards to the climate emergency, as there is concern that the greatest climate polluting nations will not be as severely affected as poorer nations: '[a] growing body of climate-economy literature shows that poor countries are particularly vulnerable to weather and climate shocks, whereas rich countries tend to show no significant vulnerability' (Bathiany, Dakos, Scheffer & Lenton 2018). The economic apartheid that has characterised the colonial, postcolonial and neoliberal eras is being exacerbated in the climate emergency: 'since the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was established in 1988, powerful sectors of society have ignored, even scorned, "wake-up calls" that threaten their privileged position and huge corporate profits' (Cromwell & Edwards 2019:[Sp]).

The speculative Wakanda is not burdened with the structural inequalities that persist in postcolonial nations – structural inequalities which have been exacerbated by the neoliberal onslaught, and this absence invites interrogations of privilege. The film's narrative implies that T'Challa and his forefathers are, due to their privileged positioning, indifferent to the hardships affecting many ordinary citizens in other African nations, as well as Africans in the diaspora – many of whom are descended from African

ancestors who were violently enslaved and shipped from the continent. Some commentators note that the film raises questions around black identity/identities – with Anthony Faramelli (2019:[Sp]) pointing out that:

> [w]hile Killmonger articulates a perverted notion of [Léopold Sédar] Senghor's negritude, Nakia's 'calling' to liberate people who 'have nothing' is closer to [Frantz] Fanon's Pan-Africanism. Pan-Africanism, especially as it is understood in Fanon, is a form of socialist African unity and solidarity that crosses racial lines. This means that it avoids negritude's problematic essentializing of black identity.

Denise Williams (2018:27) notes, 'Wakandans are not Black – at least not at first. Their collective self-definition is tethered to conceptions of nation, tribal alliance, and geography'. That *Black Panther* engages with the entanglements of race, culture and class, is arguably why the film has elicited such a diversity of responses.

The film provides commentary on privileged positioning, highlighting, in particular, the issue of class as a complicating, ensnaring issue in race relations. *Black Panther*'s narrative aims to sensitise viewers from privileged positions, who might not have insights into the suffering of underprivileged black people both in Africa and in the diaspora. As T'Challa and his forefathers were not colonial subjugators, they do not carry any colonial shame. On the note of colonial shame, many descendants of colonial nations have benefited economically and over time structurally from the colonial exploits of their ancestors. Marzia Milazzo (2017:559) sums it up:

> In South Africa, whites are less than 9 per cent of the population, but own over 80 per cent of the land and economy as well as 90 per cent of the companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE). In the United States, the median white household had $111,146 in wealth holdings in 2011, while the median Black household only had $7,113. In Britain, the average white household had circa £221,000 in assets in 2009, compared to £21,000 for Bangladeshi and £15,000 for Black African households.[3]

There seems to be a dimming of colonial shame by the descendants of colonialists who are either unaware or uninterested in the barbaric underpinnings of their relative privilege: 'despite the visible consequences of white supremacy in our time, many white people portray racism as exceptional rather than structural, minimise its effects, or deny its existence altogether' (Milazzo 2017:559). These benefactors of historical structural inequalities feel little need to acknowledge or shoulder any responsibility for what happened a long time ago – in some cases, colonial abuses occurred in distant nations, and this geographical separation isolates them from the structural realities that the historical forces of oppressions have enacted on distant lives. Their

attitude seems to be this: it is not something they personally did, and they are not accountable simply because they landed on the economically bright side of history. In the opening creation tale of Wakanda, the father (we come to understand it is N'Jobu telling Erik this story) explains: 'The Wakandans used vibranium to develop technology more advanced than any other nation, but as Wakanda thrived the world around it descended further into chaos' (Coogler 2018 00:01:11). The chaos is revealed as an animated fly-through of some key events in human history: a medieval battle, slavery, the tanks and fighter pilots from the Second World War, and the mushroom cloud from a nuclear bomb. The father continues: 'To keep vibranium safe, the Wakandans vowed to hide in plain sight, keeping the truth of their power from the outside world' (Coogler 2018 00:01:27). In short, Wakandans isolated and protected themselves rather than assisting others.

Wakanda is a mirror for those in positions of structural privilege: the lucky vibranium meteor is a speculative symbol for structural privilege. T'Challa and his forbears too feel no sense of responsibility for other less fortunate countries or peoples, and are unaware of how their inaction could have been culpable in bringing about – or even perpetuating – the hardships of others. As Killmonger says, 'You know, where I'm from, when black folks started revolutions, they never had the firepower or resources to fight their oppressors. Where was Wakanda? Hmm?' (Coogler 2018 01:29:55). For groups in privileged positions (and thus all privileged viewers) the pressing issue of inaction is foregrounded. Inaction is not impotent. Its potentials are as toxic as malicious actions – we see this through, for instance, in contemporary society, the wilful inaction around climate change. As Rob Nixon (2011:39) explains:

> The forces of inaction have deep pockets. Environmental activists face well-funded, well-organized interests that invest heavily in manufacturing and sustaining a culture of doubt around the science of slow violence, thereby postponing policies that would help rein in the long-term impacts of climate change.

The global inaction around climate change is now reaping a grim harvest – according to the IPBES (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) Chair, Sir Robert Watson:

> The health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever. We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide (United Nations 2019 :[Sp]).

Inaction is powerful.

In *Black Panther*, the monster of Killmonger was birthed by the inaction of the abandonment of Erik after T'Chaka (John Kani) killed Erik's father, N'Jobu (Sterling K. Brown). On the ancestral plane when he is close to death, T'Challa asks his father why he did not bring 'the boy', Erik, home (Coogler 2018 01:36:54); T'Chaka replies: 'He was the truth I chose to omit' (Coogler 2018 01:37:03). Structural privilege is a truth too many choose to omit. In Erik's life, the inaction of abandonment created a toxic emotional void within him, and this, combined with the conscientising conditions in Oakland (conditions fuelled by deprivation – a form of inaction) as well as his involvement in the iniquitous US military machine, were instrumental in creating the vengeful, distorted monster of Killmonger. Killmonger functions as the embodiment of the repercussions of negligence and serves as a cautionary tale to those in privilege: inaction has a price. As T'Challa says: 'He is a monster of our own making' (Coogler 2018 01:37:51).

Killmonger was right... and wrong

Given the entanglements of race and class in *Black Panther*, and the complications thrown up by those entanglements, it is unsurprising that Killmonger's character generated a movement on social media that #Killmongerwasright. *Black Panther* takes on issues of black suffering that were a result of historical displacement and dislocation via the character of Killmonger, but as with the class and race issue discussed above, these are not essentialised in the film.

This issue of black dispossession is complicated by Killmonger's involvement in the US military industrial complex: 'Killmonger's in part a creation of the U.S. endless war, "anti-terrorist" machine. He gets his nickname and new identity in Afghanistan, and it is there that he learns to weaponize his rage' (Schmidt 2019:1). Killmonger is wrong because he becomes the inversion of colonial subjugation, when he declares:

> I know how colonizers think. So we're gonna use their own strategy against them. We're gonna send vibranium weapons out to our War Dogs. They'll arm oppressed people all over the world, so they can finally rise up and kill those in power, and their children and anyone else who takes their side. It's time they know the truth about us. We're warriors. The world's gonna start over and this time we're on top. The sun will never set on the Wakandan Empire (Coogler 2018 01:30:18).

The chilling final line echoes the infamous celebratory maxim of the British empire during its colonial prime (Faramelli 2019, Saunders 2019). Given the trauma imposed by the British through their empire building, Killmonger's hunger for violence to satiate his revenge is the antithesis of ecofeminism, which contests toxic oppressions.

While the antagonist, Killmonger, has been poisoned by his personal and political struggles, as well as his involvement in the dehumanising US military missions, he raises pertinent points about black suffering and the responsibility we have to each other as human beings. Through Killmonger we see the tragic damage that oppression wreaks on the psyche of the oppressed, and how the dark impulse of revenge can undo both the oppressor and the oppressed. That the issue of oppressor and oppressed is complicated in *Black Panther* is part of the film's slippery inversions of deeply held historical truths – as Adam Serwer (2018:[Sp]) writes, '[i]t is remarkable that many viewers seem to have taken the "liberation" part at face value, and ignored the "empire" part, which Jordan delivers perfectly'. I wonder if it is that remarkable, after all. The deconstruction and muddling of Manichean binaries is not easy to navigate – that good and evil can co-exist within each of us, that we can even be unwitting perpetrators through our inaction, are not easy positions to take. Good and evil are easier binaries to ascribe to than the entangled emotional terrain *Black Panther* asks us to traverse. As T'Chaka tells T'Challa in the dream scene on the ancestral plane, 'It is hard for a good man to be king' (Coogler 2018 00:32:49).

Isolationism: uninvited observations

Much like the abandonment of Erik after the killing by T'Chaka of his own brother, N'Jobu, Wakanda's privileged isolationism is self-serving. The leadership of Wakanda considers their isolation necessary to safeguard their potent, secret vibranium, and the wellbeing of their own people. This self-interest currently mirrors some of the more populist forces taking hold globally: a turning inward and pushing out the other. Traditionally, isolationism is a process of closing off a nation's borders to trade and international treaties to pursue the internal wellbeing of one's country. The term was famously, historically, applied to the United States, however, in reality, the United States was no Wakanda: '[t]he United States was never a hermit nation; its isolationism was predominantly military and political, not commercial or intellectual' (Krieger 2004:440). Popular contemporary forms of isolationist policies follow this model. Wakanda's isolation is different to these forms: it is military, political, commercial and, to some extent, intellectual. Wakanda's initial isolationist, self-sufficient economic system goes against the grain of contemporary, globalised neoliberalism. The Wakanda in Coogler's film is modelled on the original comic books: '[Stan] Lee and [Jack] Kirby showed Wakanda as an Afrofuturistic wonderland where African tradition and advanced scientific technology combine' (Robinson & Neumann 2018:[Sp]). This residual representation from the comic books is, I argue, in this time of climate emergency, now an inadvertent emergent challenge to the neoliberal hegemony.

The film adheres to this comic book representation, and an ecofeminist reading of the imagery of Wakanda in *Black Panther* opens up potential concessions and complications. Our first images of the real Wakanda are of mist shrouded mountains (Coogler 2018 00:12:25) followed by goats dashing through a scenic river valley. Next up, three shepherds tending sheep greet the arriving spaceship; in the background we see cattle in what seems to be a cultivated field – this is the only cultivated field that can be discerned in Wakanda, and in the entire film – I shall return to this observation later. Further into the film, rural life in W'Kabi's village portrays rustic mud huts with no cars or roads in sight. Some villagers are working with animals (cattle and rhinos), while others cook around a fire (Coogler 2018 00:34:37). Near the film's conclusion, an image of a shepherd herding sheep across a mountain plain (Coogler 2018 01:58:54) is followed by women preparing food around a fire: one woman works with a wooden mortar and pestle, and the other with a stone grinder. Although many of these shots are fleeting background textural images, they reveal that Wakanda's economy is something of a rural agrarian economy – albeit with a fair amount of livestock production – working in harmony with the sophisticated vibranium powered techno-utopian city. Despite the technological mastery of Wakanda, there is clearly no cultural shame in Wakanda of doing rural work, suggesting a healthy (albeit somewhat utopian) balancing of city and rural life – a way of life that has not entirely severed culture from nature. While classic sexist divisions of labour appear to persist in these rural representations, Shuri's technological skill, as several theorists (Rico 2018, Dralega 2018, Schmidt 2019) point out, unsettles gender stereotypes, and complicates representative binaries.

While Wakanda's city is underpinned by the technological prowess of vibranium, many of the city buildings are mud-coloured and the greenery of plant life pervades the skyline, implying a rootedness in the Earth itself. The city exudes an idealistic vision of a sustainable urban environment: '[t]he most vivid creation is the Wakandan capital, the "Golden City," which is characterized as having cultural ties between nature and design' (Faramelli 2019:[Sp]). The city is not clogged with fume spewing transport, there is no inner-city grime, no neon advertising signs, no litter or blankets of smog, and no poverty-stricken people or sickly animals wandering the streets. The striking city of Wakanda is a strong contrast to the Seoul images in the film, drawing a clear distinction between the Wakandan city rooted in nature, and the Korean city rooted in culture: '[c]an we get more on the political economy of Wakanda, please, in the sequel? The urban market and bazaar scenes in *Black Panther* were fascinating, but too brief' (Schmidt 2019:8).

While the images of rural Wakandan African life could potentially be seen as residual elements in Williams's triptych of dominant, residual and emergent, I suggest that they are potentially powerful emergent images in a neoliberal cultural system that is

severed from the natural word. In order for our global society to tackle the planetary climate crisis, we need to return to more localised food systems that are softer on the planet: this means radically re-envisioning our consumer economy from a 'take-make-waste' system to a circular economy (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017:[Sp]). Central to this is reducing our purchasing footprint and buying from local farmers as well as eating seasonally rather than importing foods at vast environmental expense. Deregulated international trade is at the heart of neoliberalism, and this trade is currently environmentally toxic, for instance: 'hauling goods around by sea requires roughly 300 million tons of very dirty fuel, producing nearly 3 percent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions, giving the international maritime shipping industry roughly the same carbon footprint as Germany', and '[s]o far, no country has taken ownership of any emissions from international shipping' (Selin & Cowing 2018:[Sp]). As the environmental price was never factored into our economic system, we are not paying for the environmental degradation neoliberal trade is causing, effectively handing that cost to future generations to bear.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the fault lines in the globalised food trade. Maximo Torero, Chief Economist, Food and Agriculture Organisation at the United Nations, spoke about Covid-19 and what the world could do to make food supply chains more resilient to future shocks. The solution: moving from global supply chains to regional ones. Torero said that in Wuhan, China, '[t]hey tried to procure from farmers closer to the area affected' (Torero 2020:[Sp]), and pointed out how in the US:

> the ministries of agriculture are meeting to coordinate how they can regionalise their food basket needs and that's really important because normally when we think of global trade, we think of global trade internationally, like Chile will export to the Netherlands and the Netherlands to the UK. Now the region could find a way also to use this as an opportunity to promote interregional trade which is really important and what's not been exploited too much, because now the less the distance, the better it will be.

Deregulated global neoliberal trade is not only driving the Anthropocene, but as the Covid-19 pandemic reveals, is not resilient to systemic blows.

At the film's conclusion, T'Challa declares at the United Nations that Wakanda will share its knowledge and resources, and one of the European politicians asks 'with all due respect King T'Challa, what can a nation of farmers have to offer the rest of the world?' (Coogler 2018 02:06:29). Although this is certainly not the narrative the film endorses, as discussed, a nation that respects the lives of small-scale rural farmers (as the brief images of Wakandan farm life suggests) has a lot to offer the

world in terms of healing the nature-culture split, as well as protecting humanity from systemic shocks.

T'Challa's iconic closing speech at the United Nations alludes to the spectre of the climate emergency, acknowledging that 'illusions of division threaten our existence' (Coogler 2018 02:05:26):

> I am the sovereign ruler of the Nation of Wakanda and for the first time in our history we will be sharing our knowledge and resources with the outside world. Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot, we must not. We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this Earth should treat each other. Now more than ever, illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. In times of crisis, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe.

The speech is ecofeminist in its ethics – through the line 'more connects us than separates us' (Coogler 2018 02:06:08), T'Challa advocates an ecofeminist principle: the world is a web of life, and our humanity – and power – comes with responsibilities. That this compassionate sharing stance is championed by a woman, Nakia, points to the valuable role that women can play in reaching across self-centredness and healing the patriarchal neoliberal wounds. In understanding ourselves as a part of a wider social, political, economic, and environmental web, *Black Panther*'s ending suggests those in power need to play important roles in initiating new forms of sharing, reaching out and taking on responsibility for healing our toxic, self-centred global economic system. Inscribed with the ethics of fairness and consideration, the philosophy behind this messaging is socialist.

Some theorists (Sanders 2019, Tompkins 2018) have suggested that the outreach work undertaken in Oakland at the end of *Black Panther* works within the confines of neoliberalism, enacting and glorifying the benevolent capitalist benefactor – a form of charity that does not engage the structural challenges. There is something spotless and discomforting about this neatly packaged closure – we see Wakanda reaching out, but have they invited the refugees in?

Rural bliss and representational lack

A complication in the representation of Wakanda is that the imagery suggests a glorified rural utopia – there are no factory farms and no evidence of the dehumanising wage-slavery of farms or the food factory. Arguably this is because the power of

vibranium affected plant life; perhaps this plant mutation has conveniently solved the systemic brutalities in our global agricultural system where savagery is inflicted on the land, on animals – including insects – as well as human labour. This mirrors the visual exclusion of industrial farming in many of our contemporary cultural artefacts. Although writing of the United States, this is, increasingly, a farming reality across the planet: '[f]arming is heavily specialized, industrialized, subsidized. Moreover, evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the domination of corporate agribusiness has come at the expense of the economic, social, and environmental health of America's rural communities' (Van Tassel 2008:83). Iconic images of natural beauty in many blockbuster films tend to elide the horror of industrial farming. In order to expose structures of damage, it is important to look at what is excluded as much as what is included. The main reason why *Black Panther* has become a phenomenon is that it corrects a representational lack – headlining black actors and black creativity. Images of farms in our contemporary visual culture tend to romanticise a rural bliss harking back to the nineteenth century farming days. That farming in the old ways is filled with much hardship and rote labour is glossed over, as is the fact that substantial wealth in the United States (and elsewhere) was parasitically built up on the black slave labourers in the plantation system. Abuses continue: global food production is centred on the monoculture devastation of landscapes and the pervasive use of toxic pesticides. For instance, while Bayer's Monsanto is coming under fire for Roundup and Dicamba, Lee Fang (2020) reports in the *The Intercept* about the devastating effect neonicotinoids are having on insect populations. The only places where these controversial farming methods are arguably being represented and reported accurately is in the alternative media and academia. Neoliberal film systems propel an illusion of rural bliss, and the imagery in *Black Panther* does not escape this clichéd representation.

The animal farming in *Black Panther* suggests a link to traditional African farming methods with shepherds tending grazing cattle and sheep; there are even a few chickens in a cage in one image (Coogler 2018 01:58:57). In one of the market scenes, meat is being cooked (Coogler 2018 00:33:28). Animals are sentient beings who feel fear and pain, and slaughtered animals die traumatic deaths. The romantic representation of a rural utopia and the market cooking scene effectively cuts the traumatic animal slaughter out of the imagery we are exposed to – and out of our consciousness. I have always wondered why we do not see the abattoirs. Why are they omitted from our everyday view and our cultural artefacts? My take: they represent a dark part of human cruelty that we do not want to face. Our cultural impetus to eat meat and fit in with societal norms is, for most people, greater than our conscience. The only time animal bodies are potentially problematised in *Black Panther* is briefly in the animal food market in Seoul (Coogler 2018 00:41:08 and 00:41:33) where the meat market entrance to the casino functions as a metaphor for a society devoid of

humanity: it is a society consuming the bodies of other animals (meat market) and propelled by fantasies of happiness through financial gain (the casino). Controversial too are the caged rhinos W'Kabi tends as his war-creatures. Despite some problematic representations of animals, a profound illustration of the human-nature connection takes place when during the battle, Okoyo steps between M'Baku and W'Kabi's rhino, and instead of crushing Okoyo as W'Kabi intends, the rhino halts in front of her (Coogler 2018 01:54:22) – this human-animal bond trumps W'Kabi's wrath and is a triumph of care over conflict. This ecofeminist reading of the representation of animals in *Black Panther* reveals how deeply ingrained beliefs around animal killing and consumption are normalised through the exclusion of problematic realities from mainstream media.

A final note on isolationism: multiculturalism versus cultural assimilation

The narrative of *Black Panther* hinges on the otherwise harmonious Wakanda's empathy problem: when T'Challa tells W'Kabi about Nakia's desire for Wakanda to assist other Africans, W'Kabi's response is, 'You let refugees in, they bring their problems with them. And then Wakanda is like everywhere else' (Coogler 2018 00:35:14). While this statement is exclusionary, and echoes what many global north conservatives are saying about refugees, W'Kabi's observation that Wakanda is unlike 'everywhere else' mirrors what T'Challa tells Nakia in the market: 'If the world found out what we truly are, and what we possess – we could lose our way of life.' (Coogler 2018 00:34:15). Ecofeminism champions a multicultural ethos, recognising that cultural diversity is being eroded by cultural assimilation into neoliberalism. As Gaard (2018:19) points out, this cultural assimilation happens primarily through the corporatisation of humanity:

> Initially expressed through European invasions and conquest of land, enslavement of humans and animals, exploitation of ecologies, and annihilation of culture through the imposition of religion, language, and lifestyle, the enterprises and operations of colonialism are perpetuated by today's multinational corporations and the economics of industrial capitalism.

Arguably then, T'Challa and W'Kabi do have a point in wanting to protect their culture from erosion. Cultural shielding – isolating cultures from undue influence – is useful in protecting cultures, but can also create dogmatic positions where, for instance, problematic patriarchal customs or environmentally questionable cultural practices

are considered by some within cultures to be culturally essential, and hence off-limits for interrogation.

Cultures, like languages, can never be considered to be static entities, and this is the mistake that T'Challa and W'Kabi make. In fairness, though, T'Challa is not completely opposed to development and transformation – the reason why he is challenged for the throne by M'Baku is because M'Baku does not like how Shuri's genius is transforming Wakanda: 'We have watched and listened from the mountains. We have watched with disgust, as your technological advancements have been overseen by a child who scoffs at tradition' (Coogler 2018 00:23:41); the 'child' M'Baku points to, is Shuri. Cultures are hegemonic systems of organisation that reflect the tensions between the dominant, emergent, and residual elements. There are benefits to maintaining cultures, languages and religions, but the dominant needs to be in contestation and negotiation with emergent principles. These tensions within the ecofeminist matrix of cultural assimilation versus cultural protection can benefit from being viewed through the knotty discomfort of Nuttall's theory of entanglement.

The heart-shaped herb: healing the culture-nature split

The 'heart-shaped herb' is a potent ecofeminist symbol: with a nod to the rich tradition of African herbalism and strongly linking human power to a natural source, it is a speculative device that aims to heal the nature-culture split by suggesting humanity's power is rooted in nature. That the Black Panther does not ingest crushed vibranium is important – the synthesis of vibranium with this plant has created another dimension to vibranium: an evolution of vibranium in terms of its connection with the soil, plants, humanity and, as is suggested by *Black Panther*, a spiritual consciousness. The herb represents a fusion of all these elements, and points to a nexus between humanity, nature, technology and spiritual consciousness: '[t]raditional relational models prefer Humanity as colonising the eco- and techno-landscapes, distinguishing Humanity as Self, and Nature and Technology as Other. However, this essentialist view is challenged through regarding them as an open network of collaborative potential' (Potter 2019:1). Mary-Anne Potter goes on to look at the entanglement of Humanity, Nature and Technology in James Cameron's (2009) *Avatar*. These entanglements, and their collaborative potential, are impressively realised in *Black Panther*: the power of the heart-shaped herb was revealed to a shaman through a vision of the panther goddess Bast (Coogler 2018 00:00:42). Ingesting the heart-shaped herb leads to a synthesis of the herb with the body of the Black Panther warrior – we see the herb

infuse the blood of the Black Panther with vibranium (Coogler 2018 00:00:57, 00:29:14 and 01:25:06). This bodily synthesis – breaching the boundaries between vibranium and the materiality of the human body – is followed by a ritual burial, and the Black Panther awakens on the spiritual ancestral plane. Notably, this plane is a reflection of the psyche of each warrior: it is the African savannah for T'Challa, and the apartment in Oaklands for Killmonger, indicating that vibranium creates not only a physical synthesis but also mirrors the unconscious. That vibranium also has open-ended technological potentials is not surprising – it is a substance that softens the boundaries between human, nature, the universe, consciousness, and technology. Of course, how vibranium is seen depends on who sees it: when Ulysses Klaue (Andy Serkis) describes vibranium to Agent Ross (Martin Freeman) he says: 'it powers their city, their tech, their weapons' (Coogler 2018 00:56:41). That vibranium is essentialised to its economic value with regards to its patriarchal neoliberal worthiness in Klaue's mind is understandable: he is a man who sees the world through the lens of the potential of resource extraction for personal gain.

However, despite these open-ended potentials of vibranium, I found the vibranium mines unsettling. The huge pit is a scar in the earth, black and technologically slick (Coogler 2018 00:37:33 and 01:10:22). Despite lacking the usual images of poor miners tethered to brutal jobs in the pit, and instead portraying a glorified shiny, multifaceted technological powerhouse of 'magnetic levitation' trains (Coogler 2018 01:10:30) and 'sonic stabilizers' (Coogler 2018 01:10:45), the pit represents the dark scar of technology: hollowing out the earth for the benefit of humankind. Putting a slick sheen on the black pit is a way of glossing out the ugly extractive reality.

Conclusion

Applying an ecofeminist lens to *Black Panther* and drawing on the richness of Nuttall's theory of entanglement coupled with William's theory of dominant, residual and emergent, inspires observations that illuminate issues circulating within our contemporary neoliberal culture. Some insights are invited: observations of privilege, race and class, as well as multiculturalism – however, insights into the rural imagery of Wakanda and the portrayal of animals are uninvited reflections that highlight how what is omitted can be as important as what is portrayed. As Gert Biesta (2017:54) observes: '[a] crucial step in the process of emancipation therefore consists of exposing the workings of power – demystification – because it is assumed that only when we know how power works and how it works upon us that we can begin to liberate ourselves and others from it'. While isolationism is represented as a negative force in *Black Panther*, the lensing of isolationism as a necessary response to the Anthro-

pocene reveals that moving from global to regional supply chains is necessary to mitigate the planetary breakdown caused by neoliberal policies. Finally, the heart-shaped herb functions as a speculative symbol of ecofeminist hope by collapsing boundaries between nature, human, technology, and consciousness. While Black Panther is not an ecofeminist text per se, I hope this article has engaged readers in the entangled potentials that an ecofeminist analysis can activate, and that analysing mainstream cultural artefacts through the theoretical framework of ecofeminism has liberatory potentials by provoking alternative and uninvited insights.

Notes

1. Mary-Anne Casselot (2016:76-77) concisely outlines some of the debates operating within the broad field of ecofeminism: 'many trends coexist within ecofeminism, going from spiritual ecofeminism, Marxist-oriented ecofeminist analysis of work, cyborg ecofeminism, animal rights ecofeminism, and many more. Another hint that ecofeminism generates disagreement is the controversy about the label "ecofeminist" itself: some use "ecofeminism" as a synonym of "political feminist ecology", while others add adjectives to specify their stance such as "social ecofeminism" or "cyborg ecofeminism" (Plumwood 1993, Sturgeon 1997). Also, others reject the term and favour "environmental feminism" or "ecological feminism" (Agarwal 2001)'.

2. Robert Saunders (2019) makes acknowledgement for the quote to: Gilroy, P. 1993. *The black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*. London: Verso. However, in his article, Saunders sees *Black Panther*'s Wakanda as an inversion of the maxim "geography is fate" whereas I see the prosperity resulting from the vibranium meteor to support the assertion.

3. Milazzo's note 11 gives sources for this information on structural inequality.

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