Liberatory violence or the gift: paths to decoloniality in *Black Panther*

> ## Xiletelo Mabasa

Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa.
xiletelomabasa@gmail.com (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8561-6821)

> ## Priscilla Boshoff

Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa.

p.a.bosho@ru.ac.za (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1226-7939)

ABSTRACT

Black Panther's (Coogler 2018) popularity amongst its black audiences in part stems from its foregrounding of the persistent social injustices engendered by colonialism and slavery (what Aníbal Quijano (2000:533) terms 'coloniality') and black people's struggles to overcome them. As a representational tactic in approaching this theme, the Hollywood blockbuster draws on the imaginings of Afrofuturism, which variously endorses radical or more conciliatory approaches to decoloniality. This southern theoretical approach and the critique of coloniality offered by Afrofuturism frame our exploration of how the film positions the hero, T'Challa and the villain, Erik Killmonger, as embodiments of contrasting approaches to emancipation from colonialism's entrenched legacy. Using a structuralist approach that draws on the narrative models of Tsvetan Todorov, Vladimir Propp and Claude Levi-Strauss, we analyse the film's approach to decoloniality by examining the relationship between T'Challa and Killmonger as the protagonist and antagonist respectively. The analysis reveals the limitations of the film's construction of the hero's and villain's understandings of the path to liberation. Rather than offering a revolutionary remedy for the injustices of colonialism and its aftermath, the film embraces a liberal standpoint that remains palatable to the white establishment, both within Hollywood and the broader socio-political milieu.

Keywords: Coloniality, Decoloniality, Afrofuturism, Black radicalism, Black liberalism, *Black Panther*.

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Liberatory violence or the gift? Paths to decoloniality in *Black Panther.*

"Black Panther" may be a rare feel-good movie for black Americans, but it should not be mistaken for an attempt at liberating Africa from Europe (Gathara 2018:[Sp]).

Patrick Gathara's (2018) incisive assessment of *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) is an apt place to begin our examination of the film's potential critique of coloniality. His criticism raises two important questions that are the focus of this article. The first relates to the film's stance with respect to previously colonised and enslaved peoples, both in Africa and the USA, their relative positions within coloniality, and their relation to colonising power, here primarily identified as "Europe". The second concerns the film's political value. Contrary to Gathara's (2018:[Sp]) objection, within the Cultural Studies approach that we adopt, it is precisely the feeling evoked by the film, the 'rare feel-good' response, that needs to be explained rather than dismissed, for it points to the sleight of hand that transforms a radical call for action into the liberal *pablum* decried by Gathara (2018) and others (Lebron 2018).

When we understand the textual strategies by which the film engenders this response, we find the key to understanding the film's political salience – its questionable 'attempt at liberating Africa from Europe' (Gathara 2018:[Sp]). Drawing on decolonial theory and Afrofuturism as an imagining of an alternative African future, we argue that the link between the pleasures afforded by the film and its political positioning is more complex than it initially appears. T'Challa, the protagonist, and Eric Killmonger, the villain, are the joint inheritors of colonial violence, which plays out unevenly in ways specific to the contexts in which each character comes to political and personal maturity.

Black Panther narrates the ascendance of T'Challa, who, together with his followers, is destined to fight alongside the other Marvel characters in their quest to vanquish Thanos in the background narrative of the superhero series. Overcoming his rival, Killmonger, he is drawn into a global – indeed, universal – battle for survival, and the film's narrative provides the motivation for his allegiance to this cause, which ultimately supersedes that of coloniality alone. Yet, it is the immediate condition of coloniality and the desire to confront and overcome it which provides the disruption that precipitates the film's narrative action.

The complex unfolding of the plot not only provides the narrative tension but also establishes the maturation of the central character, T'Challa, who is contrasted with the false hero and villain, Erik Killmonger. The narrative continuously pits them and

their ideas against each other as they respond to the influences of their different upbringings, from which they view the consequences of colonialism for Africa and the African diaspora. Both characters face the decision of whether or not to reveal Wakanda to the world and to use vibranium to combat coloniality. Both are first encountered in scenes that are heavily marked by colonialism's harsh legacy: Erik as a young boy in a poor inner-city housing project in Oakland, and T'Challa confronting a ruthless gang of kidnappers in Nigeria. Both spaces vividly (albeit somewhat stereotypically) illustrate the enduring impact of coloniality that the characters are forced to confront as part of their journeys to manhood.

The film's political value, we argue, lies precisely in the solution that each character offers the viewer on how to achieve liberation from the conditions of coloniality that have shaped their lives. If Eric Killmonger's solution is to wage a war of liberation, using vibranium to destroy the political, cultural and technological imperialism of the west, T'Challa's solution is to use vibranium as a "gift" that frees all people from the misery of coloniality through the power of technology. Decolonial theory, which offers an assessment of the present, and Afrofuturism's construction of possible futures beyond coloniality together enable a critique of the positions taken and allow us to explore the implications of the film's representational choices.

Coloniality

"Coloniality", a concept developed by South American scholar Aníbal Quijano (2000), provides a starting point for discussion. Approaching the film by means of this lens alongside narrative theory enables a critical examination of the ideological position taken by the film. As a theoretical framework, coloniality theory confronts the 'constellation of oppressions' of the enduring social, political, economic and cultural legacies of the history of colonialism (de Sousa Santos 2016:18). The era of colonialism that began with the invasion and conquest of the South American continent did not end with the demise of direct political and physical colonisation. Premised as it was on the global extraction of raw materials and human labour, and the relegation of all peoples into the racial categories that both enabled and justified these processes, the social, political and economic relations instituted by colonialism continue today in what is termed "coloniality" (Quijano 2000). Coloniality, a universal and long-standing social and political condition, thus 'survives colonialism' (Maldonado-Torres 2016:243) and is, for Quijano (2000), the preeminent feature of contemporary global social and political relations.

Coloniality is not an abstract idea but manifests in lived social practices and within established social structures. Quijano (2000) postulates that it appears in three forms:

coloniality of power, of knowledge, and of being. Coloniality of power refers to the system of domination initially instituted through the direct physical and political processes of colonialism by colonial powers. It is identifiable now within the socio-economic structures of post-colonial states which have been integrated into the highly uneven global social and political order (Quijano 2000). Coloniality of knowledge refers to the obliteration, or stripping, of value, of occupied or enslaved people's systems of knowledge, an "epistemicide" accompanied by the valorisation of western canons of knowledge and ways of understanding.

These first two conditions, of knowledge and power, are enmeshed with, and form a foundation for, the third existential dimension of coloniality, that of 'being' (Maldonado-Torres 2007:240). Coloniality of being starts with the 'normalization' within colonised spaces of the 'extraordinary events that take place in war', such as slavery, rape and death (Maldonado-Torres 2007:255). Coloniality of being thus describes the psycho-social status of the *damné* (Fanon 1967), caught in the 'hellish existence' of life within the colony in which such acts are routine (Maldonado-Torres 2007:255). Coloniality therefore refers not only to physically appropriated lands, peoples and resources, but also to the very being of each person (Quijano 2000:547). Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007:253) argues in this regard that a key 'problem' in modern western civilisation has been the way in which the west has suppressed 'the understanding of coloniality in all its aspects', and has refused to recognise 'the efforts by the damné to overcome the imposed limits by the cruel reality of damnation or the naturalization of war'.

This refusal creates and sustains what Maldonado-Torres (2007:254), drawing on Martin Heidegger's (1962) view of Being, terms 'sub-ontological difference', in other words, the difference in the category (or quality) of being between colonisers and colonised (that is, the being that lies below Being, 'Dasein'). As a way of overcoming the 'incomplete death' of the coloniality of being, Maldonado-Torres (2007:253) turns to Emmanuel Levinas' notion of gift-giving. Levinas (1969) proposes that it is through gift-giving that the sharing of a common world becomes possible. The gift, a 'trans-ontological moment', is a 'metaphysical act that makes possible the communication between a self and an Other' (Maldonado-Torres 2007:258). If coloniality tries to 'obliterate the traces of the trans-ontological by actually giving birth to a world in which lordship and supremacy rather than generous interaction define social dynamics in society', decoloniality creates 'a reality where racialized subjects could give and receive freely in societies founded on the principle of receptive generosity' (Maldonado-Torres 2007:259-260).

Maldonado-Torres draws here on Fanon's conclusion to *Black skin, white masks* (Fanon 1968:231), in which Fanon asks 'Was my freedom not given to me then in

order to build the world of the You?'. However, this freedom of and for reciprocity is hard-won. Indeed, only won for the colonised, Fanon (1968) argues, through violence. In the *Wretched of the earth*, Fanon (1967[1961]:68,73) asserts that liberatory violence is the only logical response to the violence of colonialism: 'the colonised man finds his freedom in and through violence'; in order to free themselves, the colonised must 'imagine all possible methods for destroying the settler'. Violence in the quest for freedom from colonisation is, for Fanon (1967[1961]:254), the 'work' that makes possible a 'new history', one in which, to paraphrase the concluding lines of the book, men can 'recognise each other…meet…together and talk to each other'. Violence thus establishes the social ground on which the (ethical) encounter with the 'Other' takes place. Our analysis of *Black Panther* examines how the film's narrative choices favour Levinas' gift and repudiate Fanon's decolonial violence, and the consequences of this choice.

Afrofuturism

Mutual recognition and reciprocity is thus the precondition for decolonisation; but what shape this decolonised space might take is left to a new imagining. For, if coloniality has effaced African epistemologies, social institutions and ways of being, it has also undermined 'African imaginations of the future' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014:182). Afrofuturism, 'an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation', offers powerful ways to visualise the forms that a possible (decolonised and emancipated) African future might take (Womack 2013:9). As an aesthetic and cultural movement, Afrofuturism is seen as 'a means to understand the transformation of African peoples' as they confront the 'oppressive forces of discrimination, and the complexities of modern urban life and postmodernity' (Anderson & Jennings 2014:35). But it is also understood as a revolutionary subgenre of science fiction, a genre which – no less than superhero films – has historically marginalised black people, and which traditionally had no place for black characters in the imagined futures of white writers and producers. If 'people of colour weren't factors at all', as Ytasha Womack (2013:7) remarks of early science fiction film and television, Afrofuturism places Africa and African peoples centre stage.

Yet, while it imagines a socially and technologically advanced Africa, Afrofuturism's vision has no simple teleology. Instead, it 'distrusts models of progress and development, prizing instead time-traveling leaps, sidesteps into alternate universes, and the reanimation of history' (Samatar 2017:176). Thus, rather than a final destination, the genre is characterised by a "bricolage" aesthetic that draws on and merges whatever is "at hand" (Samatar 2017). The traditional, the contemporary, and the

futuristic, are all grist to its mill, woven together in magical assemblages of custom, cyber culture, myth, and space-age technology. If, in the westernised modernist world, indigenous African knowledge, like other southern epistemologies, is regarded as superstitious and non-scientific, resulting in its relegation into non-existence or inferiority (de Sousa Santos 2012:54), then Afrofuturism reclaims and redeems these worldviews, cramming them imaginatively together to create a technologically advanced African society (Samatar 2017). As Nigerian-American fantasy novelist Nnedi Okorafor (cited by Whitted 2016:208) remarks on the merging of technology and traditional beliefs in her writing, this construction reflects their actual relationship in African society: 'To be African is to merge technology and magic'. By means of this eclectic "remix", Afrofuturism claims a space for Africa and Africans within what Mark Dery (2016) calls the 'future present' of the twenty-first century.

But what happens to the profound 'cultural instrumentality' (Khun 1990:1) of Afrofuturistic film when it meets the Hollywood "machine" (Neale 1981)? Stephen Neale (1981:6) is referring here to the ways in which Hollywood regulates, at an industrial scale, the production of film along with its attendant 'meanings and positions' and 'orders of subjectivity'. What of Afrofuturism's liberatory potential when produced within such a context? Is it necessarily compromised? Samuel Delany (cited by Dery 1993:189) might argue that it *is* compromised because, for him, the power of science fiction comes from its status as a marginal genre: 'the most forceful and distinguishing aspect of science fiction is that it's marginal. It's always at its most honest and most effective when it operates…from the margins'. So, he continues, 'Whenever…it claims to take centre stage, I find it usually betrays itself in some way' (Delany cited by Dery 1993:189). *Black Panther*'s status as a key narrative within the Marvel Universe places it unequivocally "centre stage". By no means a marginal production, this status and position has profound consequences for the narratives and meanings it is allowed to offer. As a text within the superhero and blockbuster genres, *Black Panther* must meet the needs of its audience by fulfilling their genre expectations. However, the selfsame audience expectations also provide 'opportunities for their disruption', allowing the filmmaker to create the impressive and refreshing *difference* that is so essential for success (Gledhill 2007:254). This difference *Black Panther* achieves spectacularly – for the audience – through the tropes of Afrofuturism; but one cannot ignore that it is also the difference that makes all the difference to the film's profitability.

Along with the fellow blockbusters within Walt Disney's Marvel Cinematic Universe, the enormous commercial success of *Black Panther* must be taken into account in any assessment of the role it might play in the imagination of its audiences and its social consequences. The deal struck between profit and the imagination forms a necessary point of critique. Robert Warshow (cited by Gledhill 2007:257, emphasis

added), commenting on the profitability of a different Hollywood genre – the gangster film – in another era, argues that its success 'rests not in its official solution to a problem – "crime does not pay" – but its ability to *provide at an imaginative level a quite different response to American society'. Black Panther*, too, offers a "response to American society", a response shaped by – and read through – increasingly visible calls for the redress of the social injustices of coloniality. This point is picked up by Shenid Bhayroo (2019:16), who argues that 'Afrofuturism, albeit in an imperfect incarnation in *Black Panther*, offers opportunities, on a global scale, for an emerging awareness of a reimagined egalitarian Afro-future'. The irony is that 'the narrative of the benevolent saviour king *Black Panther* is a commodity owned by a global corporation' (Bhayroo 2019:16).

Method

The purpose of our analysis is to make explicit the textual strategies through which the different responses to coloniality embodied by T'Challa and Killmonger are constructed and made acceptable to the Hollywood audience; we do this by using the structuralist narrative models of Tsvetan Todorov (1977) and Vladimir Propp (1968). Todorov's (1977) five stage model is premised on the principle of transformation over time. It pinpoints what counts as the disruption, what steps are taken to rectify the disruption, and what is validated as a resolution: these moments, and the process of transformation that they imply, alert us to the discursive positioning of the text (Fiske 1987). Propp's (1968) character functions provide us with a means of identifying what kinds of subjects the narrative constitutes as heroic or villainous. As an action film, the hero in this case is constituted as a 'seeker' hero who goes on a quest; the narrative is then a recounting of the hero's quest to overcome the villain and 'ascend the throne' (Propp 1968:21).

In contrast to these "syntagmatic" approaches to narrative, Levi-Strauss' narrative model is "paradigmatic"; his model of binary opposites enables the analyst to identify the latent meanings constructed by the text. It goes beyond a recounting of the narrative form to ask "what is the meaning of the text"? For Levi-Strauss, a narrative's 'chain of events' (Bordwell & Thompson 2008:75) is less important than the "deep structure" that it shares with other "myths". This "deep structure" is organised around binary oppositions, which provide a symbolic way of resolving the underlying tensions that characterise social life (Fiske 1987). 'Myth', argues Levi-Strauss (cited by Lapsely & Westlake 2006:155), 'substitutes itself for…experience and procures the beneficent illusion that contradictions can be surmounted and difficulties resolved'.

As our analysis is informed by these narrative models, the narration of chosen moments of the plot is essential in order to generate the evidence on which we base our argument. We also draw on visual and social semiotic theory (Rose 2016; Hodge & Kress 1988) in order to identify signifiers, particularly in relation to dress, setting, and action, as these are indicative of the subjectivities that are "performed" in this imaginary space (Butler 1993).

Findings and analysis

Opening sequence

Black Panther is set in a world where the condition of coloniality is experienced by all except for the citizens of Wakanda. This condition, and Wakanda's relationship to it, is established in the opening sequence, in a voice-over in which an (as yet) unknown African father, 'Baba', tells his son the foundation myth of Wakanda. Wakanda had been saved from chaos by the divine commandment of Bast, whose pacifying power is represented by the Black Panther. This authority, manifested in the Black Panther's physical might and induced by the Vibranium-infused heart-shaped herb, effectively subdues the internecine struggle that marks the foundation of Wakandan society.

The outside world is less fortunate. The father continues, 'as Wakanda thrived, the world around it descended further into chaos' (01:19). Thus, rather than directly naming it, colonialism and its aftermath are described obliquely. "Chaos" is abstractly represented through high modality animated visuals depicting, *inter alia*, chained slaves and mechanised warfare, including the atomic bomb. Colonialism and its aftermath are thereby subsumed within the generalised "chaos" of global history. It is this ubiquitous "chaos" that provides the reason for keeping the true nature of Wakandan society and technology a secret from the rest of the world: to 'keep vibranium safe' (01:29). But, given Wakanda's long security, the son asks the father, 'Why [do we still need to hide]?' (01:44). It is this "Why?" that the film then sets out to answer.

The primary disruption

The scene following directly on from the opening sequence provides the narrative catalyst; it is revisited twice more as the plot unfolds, each recounting of the scene adding details and complicating its meaning and consequences. We are taken to the poor neighbourhood of Oakland, California, into the heart of the black American experience of coloniality and the birthplace of the Black Panther Party in 1966 (Ongiri 2018). It is night time; the dark colours imbuing the scene warn the viewer of the

potential threat posed by this poor inner-city space. Outside, a group of boys play basketball with a milk-crate hoop on a run-down court.

Inside the adjacent tenement, two men bending over a blueprint discuss what appears to be some kind of operation: that it may be a crime that is being discussed is suggested by the weapons openly displayed on the table. But, behind the men, a television showing news footage of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots locates the scene historically and provides the context for the weapons and tactical planning. This notorious incident is emblematic of black American resistance to the oppression that continued long after the centuries of slavery ended, as is the Public Enemy poster on the wall.

The audience learns later in the film that it is this struggle that N'Jobu has decided to join, using the power of vibranium to free the oppressed. However, only when T'Chaka appears before him do we learn that N'Jobu has betrayed Wakanda. He has revealed the position of the vibranium to Klaue, who has stolen some of the precious metal in a violent raid. This robbery is the initial 'misfortune' that befalls the 'family' of Wakanda, and which precipitates all further action (Propp 1968:27,34). The scene ends with T'Chaka's open accusation; N'Jobu's guilt is confirmed and T'Chaka's anger justified. Outside, mysterious lights flying back into the sky suggest that N'Jobu has been taken to Wakanda, and the scene ends.

Initial equilibrium/preparation

His father's untimely death provides the disruption that initiates T'Challa's personal growth. T'Challa endures this disruption and the ritual combat that it precipitates with confidence. However, he is troubled by the question of what kind of king he is to become. M'Baku, on challenging him, had confronted him with the changes that had taken place in Wakanda which he sees as under threat. M'Baku feels 'disgust': not only is 'tradition' threatened by 'technological advancements' (23:47), but T'Challa is an incapable leader, 'who could not even keep his own father safe [from being killed by Helmut Zemo]' (24:05). In an attempt to resolve M'Baku's troubling questions, T'Challa begs his father in the ancestral plane (Figure 1), 'Tell me how to best protect Wakanda' (32:27). T'Chaka offers him counsel, confident that he has prepared his son for the role he is to assume: 'Have I ever failed you?' (32:17) he asks. The irony of this question is only later revealed; for now, it suffices to soothe T'Challa, who, following his father's advice to surround himself with wise counsellors, talks to Nakia and W'Kabi about his role as leader and protector of Wakanda.

FIGURE **Nº 1**

T'Challa visits the ancestral plane for the first time. Image via Marvel/Walt Disney Studios.

They offer him contrasting advice about how to use his power, both of which he rejects. Nakia, who we first meet in Nigeria's Sambisa Forest as she leads a mission to rescue abducted women from a gang of armed insurgents, reminds him that 'there's people out there who have nothing' (33:55). To his question, 'What would you have Wakanda do about it?' (33:58) she replies, 'Share what we have' (34:01). She objects to his demur that 'We could lose our way of life' (34:20): Wakanda is 'strong enough to help others' and 'protect ourselves at the same time', she argues (34:22). W'Kabi, however, disagrees with her estimation of Wakanda's strength, and echoes T'Challa's concerns: if Wakanda were to 'let refugees in', (35:14) as Nakia had suggested, they would 'bring their problems with them', he declares (35:16). Wakanda would then be 'like everywhere else' (35:19), in other words, lose its unique status and identity, subsumed by those it admits within its borders. Rather, he would heroically take his men to go and 'clean up the world' (35:27). Again, T'Challa cannot agree: 'waging war on other countries has never been our way' (35:30) .

Disruption/complication

While T'Challa prepares for combat, a disruption occurs far from Wakanda, at the symbolic heart of the colonial empire, the British Museum. Here, we meet Erik Killmonger for the first time (we are unaware that he is N'Jobu's son) as he retrieves an ancient vibranium artefact with Klaue's assistance. That these two scenes take place simultaneously in the film's timeline is telling: as each other's foil, both central

characters face a struggle to become the men they need to be. The Museum scene recapitulates the original crime of Erik's father, who had enabled Klaue to steal vibranium from Wakanda 30 years before. But it also alludes to what drives him (and his father before him) to the crime.

Confronting the museum director in front of a display of African artefacts, Erik reminds her of the colonial violence that made the display possible: the vibranium tool he points to was 'taken by British soldiers' (16:23). Bitterly (16:40), he asks if 'they paid a fair price' for it, or if they simply took it like 'they took everything else' (16:43). These questions, scornfully addressed to the director, demand a response from the viewer too; but the response is substituted for, in effect, by the violence and spectacle of the audacious robbery and the murders that accompany it.

Action/transference and struggle

T'Challa, made aware of the theft, plans action against Klaue, identified as the perpetrator of the original attack on Wakanda. He receives from his sister Shuri the magical agent of his vibranium-fortified Panther suit, and, transferred to Korea, the location of the quest, there joins in direct combat with Klaue. This long sequence, with its spectacular fights and car-chases, confirms T'Challa's superhero status. But, despite his physical prowess, Klaue evades him. Instead, Klaue receives his punishment at the hands of Erik, who, turning on his ally, kills him in cold blood and takes his body to Wakanda where it serves not only as his passport but as a sign of his purported heroism.

Second disruption/return

The death of Klaue brings to a close this historical injustice, at the same time that it clears the stage for the resolution of the film's enigma, the question of T'Challa's personal and political maturation. T'Challa now faces a crisis. Returning to Wakanda without Klaue, he is 'unrecognised' and W'Kabi, once the hero's 'helper' (Propp 1968:39,60), turns his back on him. Disturbed by this repudiation, and by the sight he had received of a ring, identical to his father's, hanging from Erik's neck, T'Challa goes to Zuri seeking answers. 'What happened to my Uncle N'Jobu?' he asks (01:04:16).

We now return to the initial scene in the Oakland apartment, the scene that, unknown to T'Challa until now, has been the crux around which his fate and that of Wakanda pivots. N'Jobu tells T'Chaka his reasons for his betrayal of Wakanda. As a Wakandan 'war dog' (01:05:24) secretly placed on assignment in the USA, he had become aware

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Erik Killmonger and T'Challa confront each other as Killmonger reveals his true identity and lays claim to the throne. Image via Marvel Studios/Walt Disney Studios.

of the hardships and persecution faced by black Americans. He describes their fate as unmitigatedly bleak, crushed by the violence of coloniality: their 'leaders have been assassinated' (01:05:56), their communities are 'flooded with drugs and weapons' (01:05:59) and they are 'overly policed and incarcerated' (01:06:01). Initially neutral – 'I observed for as long as I could!' (01:05:53) – he becomes 'radicalised,' as Zuri describes him (01:05:50). Identifying with African Americans, whom he describes as 'our people' (01:06:05), he now desires action: they can 'fight back' (01:06:08) if they have the right 'tools' (01:06:07), such as 'vibranium weapons' (01:06:10). Indeed, not only could they 'overthrow every country', but Wakanda can, in turn, 'rule them all' – but in 'the right way' (01:06:11).

N'Jobu's passionate vision of an alternative colonial empire ruled by Wakanda is soon repeated by Erik in Wakanda's tribal council room when he confronts T'Challa (Figure 2). But, crucially, in the scenes prior to Erik's recapitulation of his father's objective, we are primed to reject him – and by association, his version of liberation. Fulfilling T'Challa's apprehension that N'Jobu may have betrayed Wakanda, but that his father 'may have created something even worse' (01:12:16), Ross reveals that Erik is 'one of ours' (01:11:35): in other words, his are the immoderate passions of the nation in which he grew to manhood. While his intelligence is attested by his education at prestigious universities, 'Annapolis' and 'MIT', it is his capacity for armed violence in the interests of American imperialism that is foregrounded (01:12:47). As an elite

soldier (in the 'SEALs') he 'racked up confirmed kills', a passionless blood-letting ('like it was a video game') that wins him the nickname 'Killmonger' (01:12:52). As a member of a 'JSOC ghost unit', he becomes totally unaccountable: he can 'drop off the grid', 'commit assassinations' and 'take down governments' (01:12:59). This violence literally becomes Erik's defining hallmark: in the combat scene (Figure 3) the camera lingers on his naked body, shockingly scored by the countless scarifications that record his kills, while he threateningly brandishes a spear out of the frame at the viewer.

That Erik has lost his way is confirmed in the scenes that follow: his merciless killing of Zuri and T'Challa (markedly contrasted with the moderation exercised by T'Challa when he combats M'Baku); and when he returns to the ancestral plane to meet his own father. In this third return to the Oakland apartment, Erik is once again the abandoned child; an incomplete and immature character, he wavers between his childhood and adult forms. As the adult, he seeks confirmation in his father's belongings of his Wakandan heritage which he finds, tellingly, along with a gun; as the child, he is unnaturally dispassionate and will not grieve: 'Everybody dies', he states coldly of the context of coloniality (01:27:34). 'It's just life around here' (01:27:37). If N'Jobu blames himself, 'I should have taken you back long ago' (01:27:47), the adult Erik rejects his conclusion that he is 'lost' (01:27:20). Instead, the scene closes with his declaration 'your home [Wakanda] is the one that's lost. That's why they can't find us' (01:28:01).

FIGURE № 3

Erik Killmonger confronts T'Challa. Image via Marvel/Walt Disney Studios.

Erik then sets out to the council his plan for liberation – the 'false' or 'unfounded' claims of the false hero in Propp's (1968) schema – vowing to use his knowledge of the West ('I know how colonizers think') to defeat it. His vision grows increasingly ruthless and uncompromising: using the west's 'own strategy' (01:30:21) of imperialism, he will 'send out vibranium weapons' (01:30:24) to 'oppressed people all over the world' (01:30:27). They will 'rise up' and 'kill those in power', including, horrifyingly, 'their children' (01:30:30). The world will thus 'start over', but 'this time we're on top': vaingloriously echoing the boast of the British imperialists, 'the sun will never set on the Wakandan Empire' (01:30:42).

Erik's plan for revenge and his estrangement from his father, symbolically cemented by his destruction of the garden of the heart-shaped herb that enables communication with the ancestors, contrasts markedly with T'Challa's second meeting with T'Chaka. Mortally wounded and once again in the ethereal calm of the ancestral plane, dressed in the white dashiki that symbolises his purity of purpose, he gravely confronts his father and the ancestors. If T'Chaka was culpable – 'You were wrong! [not to "bring the boy home"]' - then the ancestors gathered behind him are too: 'All of you were wrong!' Not only is Erik now 'a monster of our own making', but the ancestors who '[turned] their backs on the rest of the world' let 'the fear of our discovery stop us from doing what is right' (01:36:56). T'Challa resolutely states his new-found purpose: to 'take the mantle back' from Erik and 'right these wrongs [caused by self-imposed isolation]' (01:37:57).

Mount Bashenga, the site of the final conflict, is the location of the vibranium mine. As the resource at the heart of the conflict, the battle waged in its depths between T'Challa and Erik, now too wearing a Black Panther suit, represents and decides the outcome of their ideological war over what to do with the power vibranium represents. T'Challa again attempts to reason with Erik, asking if he wants 'us' to become 'just like the people you hate so much?' (01:50:33). His reply suggests that it is not liberation he is fighting for, but rather personal revenge upon the world that 'took everything away' from him (01:50:44). 'I'm gonna make sure we're even,' he declares recklessly, unconcerned that he has 'become them [like the colonisers he hates]' or whether he 'will destroy the world, Wakanda included' (01:50:48).

Return/second equilibrium: a single tribe

T'Challa's very different vision introduces a new equilibrium. It begins quietly in Oakland with a 'Wakandan International Outreach Center' (02:01:37), restitution for the harm caused by his father, but it is formally heralded when he addresses the

United Nations General Assembly (Figure 4).

Regally dressed and self-confidently poised as the King he has become, we are invited by the camera to both look up to him and identify with him as he promises to 'work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this earth should treat each other' (02:05:51). He will share Wakanda's resources with the world, bringing his country out of secrecy and breaking tradition. 'We must find a way to look after one another,' T'Challa persuades the delegates, 'as if we were one single tribe' (02:06:1).

Discussion

Erik and T'Challa respectively symbolise the opposing values of the west and Wakanda's acolonial space, a dichotomy informed by an Afrofuturistic imaginary. If Erik is violent, so is T'Challa, but his violence is not unaccountable; rather, it is formalised and made intelligible and acceptable through communally sanctioned ritual performance. If Erik's character has been (mis)formed in a bleak inner-cityscape, T'Challa has grown up in a space where customary life, linked to nature, exists harmoniously and without contradiction alongside the utopian – and futuristic – capital city. The usual binary, which negatively contrasts tradition with science, and which is expected from within a western and colonial worldview, is not visible here. Differences of custom in Wakanda are respected, rather than seen as a reason for oppression, and citizens willingly

FIGURE **Nº 4**   ‹

King T'Challa takes his place amongst the nations. Image via Marvel Studios/ Walt Disney Studios.

submit to the rule of a divinely appointed King. Afrofuturism thus captures the imagination with promises of an "untouched" society at one with itself, as much as it reconciles nature and technology.

This idealised fantasy space provides the magnetic emotional backdrop against which an ideological struggle plays out over what counts as liberation. The ruler of this kingdom, T'Challa, rejects violence and his desire for conciliation through education and technology upliftment programmes codes him as politically liberal. This position is disguised by his regality which, combined with super-human abilities, immeasurable wealth and philanthropy, marks him as a fitting member of the global neoliberal elite, which he reassures at the United Nations. His speech, measured and stately, echoes the pace and resonance of Nelson Mandela's, the black revolutionary whose moderation was so acceptable to the west. T'Challa's character is thus carefully crafted to be able to operate on a global stage alongside the white superheroes with whom he will fight Thanos. Indeed, if vibranium is the strongest metal, and its power is as extraordinary as Erik suggests, it is all the more necessary (from Hollywood's perspective) that this latent potency be tamed and made governable via diplomacy, a skill in which T'Challa appears as accomplished as in his super-hero exploits.

His temperance therefore contrasts markedly with the violence that Fanon (1967) suggests is necessary for the destruction of coloniality: this is the violence that Erik demands, but which is made indigestible by its association with his incomplete and intemperate character. His is indeed the violence equal to coloniality required by Fanon (1967[1961]:69): 'The violence of the colonial regime and the counter-violence of the native balance each other and respond in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity…The development of violence among the colonised people will be proportionate to the violence exercised by the threatened colonial regime'. But his character becomes overcharged with meaning, for his violence comes to represent both the violence of coloniality – his warfare on behalf of imperialism – and the decolonial counter-violence he desires.

It is for this reason that the character of Black Panther is split between the persons of T'Challa and Erik, a symbolic identification signified by them donning the vibranium suits made for a single wearer. The trope of the divided superhero who battles the forces of good and evil within himself is common enough, signalling 'the schizophrenic splitting of identity into divided subjectivities in modern society' (Smith 2009:126). In *Black Panther*, however, these opposing elements cannot be allowed to exist alongside each other in one person. Erik, whose backstory arguably makes him the most complex villain in the Marvel Cinematic Universe to date (Liu 2018), represents the (negative) capacity for decolonial violence and must perforce be separated entirely

from T'Challa, whose role is to pacify the audience and reconcile it to a new world order. For this reason, the gifts given to the west by T'Challa are not commensurate with the "gift" that Levinas (1969:171) argues transcends the hurdle of non-being and makes possible the mutual recognition of the other.

The film can indeed be read as an allegory or extended metaphor that reflects a weighing of the two ideologies of emancipation favoured in the mainstream imagination. While this pairing is to be expected, as addressing and reflecting the realities of the black experience, and is one of the defining characteristics in the genre of Afrofuturism (Whitted 2016:208), it is the treatment of these positions that is of concern here. The treatment chosen is typified by the way Killmonger's death is necessitated to underline that his militant approach to black liberation is not embraced. This raises questions about targeted reactions among the intended audience and of broader motivation on the part of the film's production team.

T'Challa is the victor, but so is his cause. This is surely because his black liberalism is seen as more palatable for the white establishment (who are also a potential audience), and so it is validated by *Black Panther*'s ending. The liberal ending favoured by the narrative is admissible to Walt Disney Studios, a predominantly white-owned institution that profits from the film's success. For some fans, knowing such background facts might indeed make watching the film an ambivalent experience. However, most will probably overlook the subtext in favour of the movie's more obvious attractions and upbeat message, or be seduced by its fast pace.

Nonetheless, it is clear that Killmonger exists to challenge T'Challa's beliefs, leading him to break tradition and have a kingship radically different from that of his ancestors. The entire narrative acts as a journey of self-discovery for T'Challa, who is led at last by his discoveries concerning Killmonger's past experiences to an intense form of cognitive dissonance. He is sufficiently moved by the injustice behind Erik's story to repudiate his former isolationism. Despite his desire to adhere to tradition, T'Challa challenges the decisions of his father and ancestors and defies death to go back and reclaim the throne, for the sake of this new vision of his role. The result, anticipated by the diplomatic nature he has regularly shown, is that he chooses to share what Wakanda has with both the oppressed and the oppressors. This Black Panther is tamed by the globalist ideal but seals his conversion through a raft of philanthropic liberal welfare gestures designed to ameliorate past suffering by the oppressed. Wakanda moves out of both exclusive traditionalism and the trap of revolutionary violence to embrace the larger world. It agrees, in other words, to "forget the past" on a variety of fronts. It offers to play its part to enhance international modernism rather than to resist or oppose it, typified by T'Challa's statement to the UN that 'what we share is larger than what divides us'.

This brings us back to the place where we began, to Gathara's (2018:[Sp]) challenge of whether we have mistaken *Black Panther* 'for an attempt at liberating Africa from Europe'. Is Wakanda's gift enough to dispel the oppressive coloniality of being that we encounter in the opening scenes? Our analysis suggests otherwise. We must conclude that the film offers its viewers a new myth, in the sense suggested by Levi-Strauss (1971). In other words, *Black Panther* 'filters and organizes lived experience, acts as a substitute for it and provides the comforting illusion that contradictions can be overcome and difficulties resolved' (Levi-Strauss 1981:659).

This myth also goes by this name in a bad sense: that it substitutes imagination for reality. Colonisation has always gone under the alias that it provides a "gift" after all, in return for its exploitations. It brings with it the advantages of "civilisation". Implicit in this situation is that the west's superiority depends in large part on its technological prowess and that the benefits of this power will filter down to its colonial subjects. This relation the film utterly inverts and makes Africa the source of superior technology and power. This fantasy overcomes history and stands in for an act of real recognition. With its vibranium technology, Africa is made a superior west for which its tribal elements simply provide colour. But there is no attempt at true recognition by Hollywood of Africanness for what it really offers. Vibranium is in essence another gold that, as an exploitable metal, has its place of origin in a neoliberal hierarchy of values. Thus, when T'Challa speaks to the UN, his gesture of reconciliation is to reverse the historical superior/inferior relation by becoming the benefactor, but in this case requiring no reciprocal exchange, exacting no violence and exploitation. That this remains in the realms of imagination, not reality, ultimately undermines the film's favoured solution.

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