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Black Skins and Superhero Masks: A study of *Black Panther* (2018)

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Abstract:

Black Panther (2018) is an American superhero film directed by Ryan Coogler. It is based on a Marvel comic produced by Marvel Studios. The fictional character of Black Panther first appeared as a comic strip superhero. This paper investigates questions of racial and identity politics in the cinematic piece. By tracing the film's lineage to the history of comic books in America, the paper examines Western popular culture's depiction of Black characters. Through various cinematic allusions, the paper discusses how the ideological content of *Black Panther* succeeds in challenging the master narrative of colonialism. Furthermore, through a meticulous examination of the anti-hero Killmonger, the paper analyses the idea of "double consciousness[1]," which demonstrates the predicament of the African-American community. This paper argues that *Black Panther* deconstructs the stability of a single monolithic paradigm of history, and disavows colonial axioms of knowledge, which refuse to acknowledge history from a different perspective.

Keywords:

Black Panther, Popular culture, Race, Identity, Superhero, Hollywood, African-American

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Black Panther (2018) is an American superhero film directed by Ryan Coogler. It is based on a Marvel comic produced by Marvel Studios. This paper examines questions of racial and identity politics in the cinematic piece. It reads the film as an enabling step towards questioning the organisational and epistemological imaginaries deployed by the White masters to describe the world from the all-knowing and rational colonial gaze. Through various cinematic allusions, we investigate how the ideological content of *Black Panther* succeeds in challenging the master narrative of colonialism. This paper attempts to analyse the depiction of Black characters in the film in the context of Western popular culture. It is committed to understanding the political questions in *Black Panther,* and is not a comprehensive study of the Marvel cinematic universe.

The film begins after the events of *Captain America: Civil War* when T'Challa returns home to the technologically advanced nation of Wakanda to take responsibility as the new king. However, he realises that his position is jeopardised by the appearance of the anti-hero Killmonger. The monumental conflict between the two, fraught with pain and kinship, puts the safety of Wakanda in danger. T'Challa faces the responsibility of channelising his panther power to fight the enemies for protecting his people. Before analysing the conceptual nitty-gritties of racial politics in the film, the backstory of the celebrated Black Panther requires consideration.

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[1] Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk. Project Gutenberg*, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm.

I

Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, Black Panther emerged in July 1966 in the series named *Fantastic Four,* where we see for the first time a comic book superhero of African descent. In issue fifty-two, the Fantastic Four's team is suspicious of an "African chieftain" having an advanced gizmo and refer to him as "some refugee from a Tarzan movie" (qtd. in *The Ringer*). In issue fifty-three, he says, "I am as you can see a hereditary chieftain of the Wakandans and perhaps the richest man in all the world" (qtd. in *The Ringer*). He uses his mask not for "concealment," but rather as a symbol of his "Panther power" (qtd. in *The Ringer*). To historically place it, the comic book comes out two years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and a year after the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The violence that resulted from the Civil Rights Movement led to the assassination of Malcolm X, the founder of Organization of Afro-American Unity, and the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.

The comic book happened simultaneously with the rise of the Black Panther Party; however, Stan Lee and Marvel hesitated to identify with the group. Therefore, issue no. one hundred nineteen made it clear that the character would be called "leopard" and not "panther," because of the latter's "political connotations" (qtd. in *The Ringer*). However, the term did not gain currency, and Panther stayed popular. However, this kind of artful taciturnity by distancing the character is a questionable act on the makers' part. While the comic book character was not directly related to the political party, John Jennings, a media and cultural studies scholar at the University of California, explains that the film makes a few direct connections with the radicalised politics of the 1960s. As Ryan Coogler himself is from the Bay area, the political ideologies in the film are conspicuous. Jennings explains, "the nature of how Wakanda fights is about defense. And the party was originally the 'Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.' The Black Panther as an animal in the wild does not ever attack directly. But it does defend when it is attacked. Wakanda is a peaceful nation, but it will defend itself" (sic) (qtd. in *Vox*).

The brief shots of Black Panther Party's poster of its founder Huey Percy Newton in the Oakland apartment are shown in the film. While in the comic book version, Killmonger lives in Harlem, Coogler consciously places him in Oakland in the film which is also his hometown and the originating location of the Black Panther Party. What certainly caught the attention was the film's promotional poster that featured T'Challa sitting on his throne, majestically facing the camera. The image has a stark resemblance to 1960s poster of Huey Newton sitting on his peacock chair. The New York Historical Society describes his image as follows: "Newton proudly poses on his rattan throne: spear in one hand, rifle in the other…The photo at once mocks Western colonialist portraiture—the zebra rug, the unambiguously 'tribal' props in the background…Newton is not an object controlled by Western colonists: he is a crusader against it." It adds, "In this portrait, he acknowledges the centuries-long history of colonialism and threatens to break down the system itself" (qtd. in *NYhistory*). The throne symbolises radical black activism, and Coogler's choice of re-creating this image is masterfully political.

In his *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon talks about the comics of the 1950s like the Tarzan stories and Mickey Mouse adventures as "a release of collective aggression" (112), where the Black man is always portrayed as a savage 'negro' with devilish

physiognomical features. Created by Edgar Rice Borroughs[2], the Tarzan narrative is a stereotypical mix of 'dark' tropical jungle, the supreme White man and his patronising imperialistic pursuits. As Tony Warner describes, Tarzan is introduced as "the killer of beasts and many black men…it is very disturbing that his Tarzan character chooses to hang his black victims from trees with vine ropes around their necks" (qtd. in *Orlando*). However, in the period of 1960s, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created the first 'Black' Superhero, T'Challa as Black Panther, to produce flesh and blood representations of Black people. This representation did critique the American colonial gaze which could never imagine a Black community like Wakanda being immensely resourceful and technologically advanced. The comic book industry right from its inception in the 1930s involved many Jewish-Americans like Stan Lee and Kirby who tried to produce better illustrations of ethnic communities. One of the reasons for the high Jewish attendance in the comic book industry was the "anti-semitic bigotry" (Klotz 2) that was prevalent in America, and did not allow enough professional opportunities to the Jews. Will Eisner, the Jewish American comic creator, writes, comics were "a medium that was regarded as trash, that nobody really wanted to go into" (qtd. in Royal 4). The Jewish[3] presence in comics allowed a fledgling genre to be used as a medium to give voice to their experiences, though the primary objective was earning money for survival. One can see how Jewish-American creators drew upon the legend of Golem, a magical creature made of clay, to fashion their superhero stories. Borrowing from Ben Katchor's critique, this is not to essentialise the medium of comic art fully as a Jewish invention, or to give a neat history of this "cultural phenomenon" (qtd. in Royal 5).

In the superhero narratives, the mask allows the individual to control how he or she is perceived. In extension, it also allowed a creator like Stan Lee, who created the figure of Black Panther, and the co-creator Kirby, who brought many superheroes into the picture, to conceal their identity to be accepted in the mainstream society. Altering the name Jacob Kurtzberg to Kirby and Stanley Martin Lieber to Stan Lee, with Lieber signifying a Jewish surname, reflects the racial threat that was so prevalent in the United States. With WWII, comic books were used to inform audiences, as Bradford Wright argues, "about the progressive war aims pursued by the United States…that cloaked propaganda within the context of good entertainment" (qtd. in Klotz 10). In the cover page of Captain America 1, one could see the protagonist hitting Adolf Hitler in the face. "As comic writers," Stan Lee says in an interview, "we had to have villains in our stories. And once World War II started, the Nazis gave us the greatest villains in the world to fight against. It was a slam dunk" (sic) (qtd. in Klotz 11). However, the anti-semitic hatred did not necessarily cease to exist, despite creators like Lee who were fighting in their own ways in those tumultuous times. The monolithic paradigm of America only allowed them to create White male characters like Captain America who were blue-eyed and blonde-haired. As Christopher Priest writes in his official post, "to

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[2] Tony Warner writes, "Like many of his contemporaries, writes his biographer John Taliaferro, Burroughs "believed in a hierarchy of race and class. In the Tarzan stories, blacks are generally superstitious and Arabs rapacious."" See Warner, Tony. "Racism and stereotypes: how the Tarzan dynamic still infiltrates cinema." *Orlando,* https://weareorlando.co.uk/page13.php.

[3] The Jewish community in America has a complex history of racial politics which is not dealt with in this paper.

many blacks, he is not Superman so much as he is SuperWhiteMan" (qtd. in *Digital Priest*). In an interview with the The Comic Book Journal in 1990s, Kirby says, " I came up with the Black Panther because I realized I had no blacks in my strip…It suddenly dawned on me — believe me, it was for human reasons — I suddenly discovered nobody was doing blacks" (qtd. in *The Comic Journal*).

Building on Stan Lee's work, Christopher Priest is the first 'Black' writer to work with the character in the 90s, and shares some important insights in his interview with *Newsarama: "*I never had editorial or creative control over the book; all of the shifts in approach and changes in the narrative were suggested by Marvel." In his official blog post, Priest writes, "During the "blaxploitation[4]" craze of the 1970s, Marvel and later DC rushed to put out numerous books starring black characters" (qtd. in *Digital Priest*). Priest's apparent disenchantment with the "near-vaudevillian un-reality of the blaxploitation stuff" was because these books were conceived by Whites who never even interacted with an African person and created "horribly offensive" and "completely inaccurate" (qtd. in *Digital Priest*) stereotypes. His honest confession highlights the fact that Marvel, the American juggernaut, is only concerned with statistical numbers and economics of the market: "Comics, as we know them, have, for 65 years, been produced by middle class whites for middle class whites" (sic) (qtd. in *Digital Priest*). These books perpetrate an epistemological ruthlessness where Superman and other heroes stand "as icons of repression and tools for eliminating (Blacks') cultural distinction." As Priest writes, "It is a kind of violence, much the same way loud music from gangsta jeeps is" (qtd. in *Digital Priest*). Interestingly, Priest's account highlights not only the narrative prejudices but also the mercenary motives of the Marvel production company. Priest's account describes how these representations are in fact overdetermined by questions of production value and economic demands of the American market. However, the film *Black Panther* complicates the thematics of race, and presents a positive representation of Wakanda and the African-American community. It is imperative to note that simply focusing on monetary concerns restricts the scope of dealing with the larger representation of race relations in the film.

II

In *Black Panther*, wide-angle shots, commonly used in architectural photography, are used to capture expansive backgrounds of Wakanda. Ariel footage shots serve to enhance its grandeur in scale and geography. Wakanda's technological advancement boasts of magnetic levitating trains, bullet-proof suits, vibranium-made weapons, skyscrapers, etc. While T'Challa, the Wakandan king, is hesitant to reveal their treasured possession of vibranium to the outsiders, Nakia, an operative who helps the oppressed, expresses that they can provide "aid, access to technology...other countries do it, we could do it better" (qtd. in *Springfield*). She adds, "Wakanda is strong enough to help others and protect ourselves at the same time" (qtd. in *Springfield*). The justification of the colonial mission to civilise the natives and its philanthropic pretence is partially undone through a technological marvel like Wakanda. As Moses Ochunu, the African History scholar in Vanderbilt University specifies, "As a synecdochical reference to Africa, Wakanda is not the ancestral source that offers no hope to its suffering, oppressed diaspora, or that itself needs redemption. It is the opposite of that—a developed, confident, and capable cradle" (qtd. in *History Network*). Wakanda

[4] This genre developed in the United States in the early 1970s, which catered to the African-American audience.

destabilises colonial narcissism as it is represented as a country which is not colonised. It hypothetically imagines the social and cultural progress of Africa, which could have been possible even without the intervention of Western merceneries.

The visual representation of Wakanda's market-place is an interesting juxtaposition of a dusty town set up against the background of Afro-futurist high rise buildings. In the end credits sequence, the film uses the saturated colour palette to portray characters with different colours: Purple for T'Challa's royalty, Red for Dora Milaje's ferocity, and so on. Moreover, the names are also styled in a traditional African script to celebrate the unique identity of the African community. The African Historian Abosede George highlights some significant historical details in the film *Black Panther*. The gigantic waterfalls of Wakanda resembles Victoria Falls in Southern Africa between Zambia and Zimbabwe. According to her, the film also draws attention to real-life issues like the Boko Haram and its kidnappings of Nigerian girls. Moreover, the dotted face of the characters is similar to the communities in Sahel between the North and West Africa. The lip plate is also a distinguishing characteristic of the Ethiopian communities. Through the diverse representations in the film, she says, we begin to "approximate the reality of how complex and diverse the real-life Africa might be" (qtd. in *Inside Edition*). Such representations of diverse African practices in the film disputes the homogeneous narratives of Western imagination. It also jolts us from our somnambulistic state of torpor.

The film deploys the genre of Afro-futurism in its visual representation of Wakanda. The term was coined by cultural theorist Mark Dery in his 1993 essay "Black to the Future." According to him, Afro-futurism is a "speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture–and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). It conflates the legacies of the past with the technologies of an imagined future to think of an alternative possibility for the Black people through the narratives and folklores of Black tradition. As Dery writes, "technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization…)" (180). Since American science-fiction films are populated with White figures, the idea of envisioning a future unfettered by the burden of colonialism is a politically empowering action. Speaking of the African-Americans, Dery raises a pertinent question: "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (180)

In this interview with Dery, Samuel R. Delany, the American science fiction author says, "the historical reason that we have been so impoverished in terms of future images is because…we were systematically forbidden any images of our past" (190-191). He adds, "And every effort conceivable was made to destroy all vestiges of…African social consciousness" (191). Therefore, Delany argues for "images of tomorrow" (190) to imagine a better future. In *Black Panther*, this future is the "present," unperturbed by colonisation. In an interview, Jennings says, "Afro-futurism gives us a space for negotiation. Between the unresolved past and the impending, potentially bright, future" (sic) (qtd. in *Vox*). Through Wakanda, we come across the existence of a "black speculative culture" (qtd. in *Vox*) that marks unimpeded agency. In a global world controlled by suffocating power structures of white privilege, the other parts of the world only exist at the receiving end. However, *Black Panther* attempts a reversal of

this dynamic by creating Wakanda as an important actor on the global stage with its rich vibranium reserves.

Frantz Fanon examines how the psychology of colonialism inculcates an inferiority complex in the minds of the colonised. This internalisation of inferiority is referred to as the "epidermal schema" (84) or epidermalization. The being of the colonised subject is seen in a "triple person" as (s)he is made responsible for, as Fanon specifies, "for my body, for my race, for my ancestors" (84). In the film, the Wakandans are not caught in an existential or a pathological complex. Through a grand low angle shot[5], we see the protagonist T'Challa looking above at the enormous standing population who have come to support his rule. It is satisfying to watch that there is no insecurity, no sense of an ontological uncertainty regarding their noses being flat, or skin colours being dark. Fanon writes that the 'Black' native is "battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects" (84). However, the film departs from the stereotypical account of 'Black' life, and accords dignity to African lives. The natives have a clear and distinct voice, not an inchoate murmur, and neither they are irrational and rudimentary in their cognitive processes. There is no burden of embroidering and rolling their tongues in a specific fashion to gain acceptability. What is refreshing is to not see women being caught in a reductionist and stereotypical representation as hysterical and uncontrolled beings. Okoye heads the Dora Milaje group who make security-related decisions, and T'Challa's younger sister Shuri is a tech-genius, perhaps better than Tony Stark AKA Iron Man himself. As Ochunu writes, "(The) Wakandan posture negates the Afro-pessimist paradigm of an Africa incapable of literally and figuratively protecting itself against the ravages of malevolent external — mostly Western — forces" (qtd. in History Network). We observe that Wakanda exists as a self-sufficient world, and staves off the colonial intervention to show that it can thrive without any support.

If we analyse the film's prologue, it begins with a child asking an ancestral voice, "Baba, tell me the story of our home" (qtd. in *Springfield*). We see that the film tells us the story of Wakanda and its community wars, the Black Panther being the protector, and so on. What is interesting to observe is that colonialism as a determining marker, as a point of inception from where history traditionally begins is undone; it is as if the Wakandans no longer see their 'pre' or 'post' in relation to colonialism. In a different context, Anne McClintock in her text *Imperial Leather* discusses in detail the concept of "panoptical time" (36), where history is envisioned as having a linear, teleological passage. As she writes, while colonialism is seen as history proper, "other cultures share only a chronological, prepositional relation to the eurocentred epoch" (11). The film contends the teleology of Western history where differences in co-existing cultures (synchronic axis of simultaneity) are mapped onto the diachronic axis of succession, which promotes racial hierarchy. Now as we have explored the different dimensions of Wakanda, the kaleidoscopic shades of the anti-hero Killmonger beckons for a detailed examination.

III

Secret identities and masking play a vital role in the superhero genre, and imply a schizophrenic division between the public and the private self, personal identity and

[5] A low angle shot is where the camera is situated below the eye-level, as it points up. It presents both the character T'challa and his people appear larger-than-life and powerful. A high-angle shot, on the other hand, makes the character appear small.

saviour persona. Speaking of African-American experience, W.E.B. Du Bois in his *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) writes, "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like [them perhaps] in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil" (qtd. in *Project Gutenberg*). This statement refers to the Blacks' physical difference from Whites, their social abuse in the West, their predicament in "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," and freeing themselves from "the revelation of the other world" (qtd. in *Project Gutenberg*). This reference is pertinent to the anti-hero of *Black Panther*, Eric Killmonger. For the first time, we see Killmonger standing at the Museum of Great Britain looking at the African artefacts. He makes a few incisive remarks to the White curator in the museum: "how do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it, like they took everything else?" (qtd. in *Springfield*) His seething resentment uncovers the history of looting antiquities, destroying goods, and hoarding treasures of the colonial period.

When Killmonger arrives in Wakanda, the film becomes even more complicated. We do not feel a sense of antipathy towards the anti-hero because he has experienced displacement, abandonment, and psychic perforation in America. Jennings writes, "The future for Black people in America was supposed to be connected to only three spaces: one, the hold of a slave ship; two, the plantation; and three, the grave" (qtd. in *Vox*). This is evident when Killmonger watches the sunset in a visually arresting tableau shot, and he says, "just bury me in the ocean. My ancestors jumped from the ships because they knew death was better than bondage." Killmonger knows the rules of survival as he sharply articulates, "I have learned from my own enemies…beat them at their own game" (qtd. in *Springfield*).

The idea of a hyphenated identity demonstrates the perplexities of the minority community through systemic racism. In Killmonger AKA N'Jadaka, we recognise a sense of what Du Bois refers to as "double consciousness" (qtd. in *Gutenberg*). Killmonger is both "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (qtd. in *Gutenberg*). While it is easy to slot him as a power-lusting villain, nuanced study makes us acknowledge his childhood trauma of homelessness. We perceive his purposeful intention of liberating the Blacks through global insurgencies. His character is meaningfully layered as it stands as a testament to the frustrated yearnings of African-Americans to be freed from the slavery of oppression[6]. The film shows the reasons behind the fulminations of Killmonger who had a troubled life. He is connected to his African homeland on both spiritual and ancestral planes. The long shadow of alienation that has haunted him since his childhood makes his anger a genuine act of protest: "The world took everything away from me, everything I loved" (qtd in *Springfield*).

His objective is to return to his homeland and take revenge for his father N'Jobu's death. The patterned scars on his body, derived from African customs, represent his killings. His ideologies remind us of Fanon's promulgation of Pan-Africanism and a

[6] N'Jobu, Killmonger's father, draws attention to the reality of African-American "leaders…being assassinated…communities being overly policed and incarcerated." According to the report by Nigel Roberts, "African-Americans represented 12 percent of the U.S. population in 2016, but that number increased to 33 percent of the prison population" (qtd. in *News One*). Blacks have disproportionately outnumbered Whites in U.S. federal prisons, which decreased considerably during Obama's administration.

call for a necessary violent revolution. A series of exciting whip pan shots indicate the frenetic pace of action. The action sequence between Killmonger and T'Challa stands as a metaphor for two kinds of histories, namely the native history and the diasporic history respectively, both equally legitimate, in conflict with each other. The film offers us both these perspectives but does not provide an unequivocal definition of "good" and "bad." This ambiguity in the film complicates the thematics of race politics.

Instead of portraying Killmonger as a stark antithetical "other" to the archetypal hero, the film underlines precisely the complexity of his character. He is not simply motivated by unscrupulous interests but rather elicits our sympathy for his conflicted personality. In the film, Killmonger does not symbolise the heroic "lack," but rather becomes a hero in his own right. The film humanises him by making the consequential choice of highlighting the gray nuances of his character, and the purpose of his vindictive acts. Speaking of Killmonger, Chadwick Boseman, who plays the king T'Challa in the film says, "I actually am the enemy… It's the enemy I've always known. It's power. It's having privilege" (qtd. in Sims, *The Atlantic*). Whereas T'Challa is from a country that remains unsullied from the dangers of colonialism, Killmonger has precisely faced the diasporic experience of self-division. As Boseman says, "T'Challa was born with a vibranium spoon in [his] mouth." He adds, "Killmonger is trying to achieve greatness…but there's an expectation of greatness for me… I don't know if we as African Americans would accept T'Challa as our hero if he didn't go through Killmonger. Because Killmonger has been through our struggle, and I [as T'Challa] haven't" (sic) (qtd. in Sims, *The Atlantic*).

Killmonger's character makes T'Challa contemplate his own position[7]. It also makes him aware of his father's sins, which include killing his brother N'Jobu, and neglecting Eric as a child. T'Chakka chooses to overlook the sufferings of Eric and all the other Black people outside Wakanda. Killmonger's bitter assertions create a conflict inside T'Challa about his own regal privileges[8] that were denied to his cousin. In the spirit plane, while speaking to his father T'Chakka, T'Challa does acknowledge that it is wrong to have turned their backs to the rest of the world: "we let our discovery [of vibranium] stop us from doing what is right" (qtd. in *Springfield*). Essentially, both T'Challa and Killmonger share the aspiration for humanity of the Black race, but they come from different starting points; whereas the former can "sympathise" with the plight of the Blacks, the latter can "empathise" with the Black condition due to his experiential reality.

Killmonger's death poignantly shows the penetrating conversations of Black liberation. He also reminds us of the revolutionary leader Malcolm X who accused the US government of engagement in genocide against Black people. In a beautifully captured Dutch Shot, which comes from the German word *Deutch*, the camera is gradually slanted from the bottom to the top to capture a sense of unease and disorientation. In the film, this shot is deployed when Killmonger becomes the king of Wakanda, and the turning camera captures the change in the status quo and his life arc from an underdog in California to the ruler. This is reiterated by him when he highlights

[7] Killmonger refers to T'challa as the "son of a murderer" (qtd. in *Springfield*).
[8] Note the different visions in the spiritual realm: While T'Challa can peacefully meet all his ancestors in the 'after-life' setting, Killmonger is transported to his apartment where his father's spirit reminds him, "I fear you may still not be welcome. [Wakandans] will say you were lost" (qtd. in *Springfield*).

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how Wakanda's geo-political prosperity is capable of shaking the existing racial order. As he vociferously proclaims, "The world's going to change, and this time we will be on top…The sun will never set on the Wakandan empire!" (qtd. in *Springfield*).

Killmonger's philosophy of domination and militarised violence on the oppressors is motivated by his rage. However, substituting the Western empire with the Wakandan empire is equally problematic. As Adam Serwer succinctly writes, "*Black Panther* does not render a verdict that violence is an unacceptable tool of black liberation—to the contrary, that is precisely how Wakanda is liberated. It renders a verdict on imperialism as a tool of black liberation, to say that the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house" (qtd. in *The Atlantic*). Therefore, the film asks us to re-assess Killmonger's idea of a Black empire, but nevertheless explains that his indignation stems from anti-humanistic forms of discrimination[9], and the prolonged distance from his promised land of Wakanda. The incognito name "Killmonger" is what America has made him, while the roots of his unadulterated self still lies hidden in the African identity N'Jadaka.

IV

The positive representation does not conceal the problematic aspects of the film. Everett Ross, who is a CIA Agent, strangely becomes Wakanda's friend, and is conveniently allowed inside Wakanda. It is strange because Ross works for an agency that would otherwise take away vibranium through devious stratagems. As Shuri jokingly remarks, "Don't scare me like that, coloniser!," and refers to the wounded Ross as a "broken white boy to be fixed" (qtd. in *Springfield*). The maniacal White agent Klaue refers to Wakandans as "savages," but the film stops at his individual villainy and does not delve into his associations with global power structures of imperialism. In the film, M'Baku, the leader of the Jabari 'tribe,' is shown to be "howling" at Everett Ross, the CIA agent. The colonial imagination always conflates the images of animality with Africans. This framework has become so obvious that we no longer question it. The nectar of a mystical flower and the "striking" of the meteorite bearing vibranium in Africa seems like a serendipitous phenomenon.

Moreover, the film's deployment of the word 'tribe' in relation to Wakandans is fraught with political connotations. The term is used with a certain ambivalence. For example, the director Ryan Coogler uses the phrase "that is my tribal world" (qtd. in *Rolling Stone*) to refer to Wakanda, whereas contemporary debates in *Pambazuka News*, *H-Net Africa*, *BBC* are contesting the category itself. In its call for papers on "Black Popular Culture," *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* specifies, "A:JPAS seeks to use an affirmative African centered logic and language of liberation, therefore, we have decided not to use the term "tribe" or slaves in reference to the African experience" (qtd. in *H-Net*). The term is misleading because "it promotes the myth of African timelessness" (qtd. in *Pambazuka)* and ahistorical abstraction. It is the result of the colonial misapprehension, and their feverish searching for technical short-hands in trying to understand the diverse African society. At this time when the academic community is contesting and re-thinking the category itself by focusing on terms like 'ethnic groups' (qtd. in *H-Net*) and 'ethnic,' this usage in the film puts the

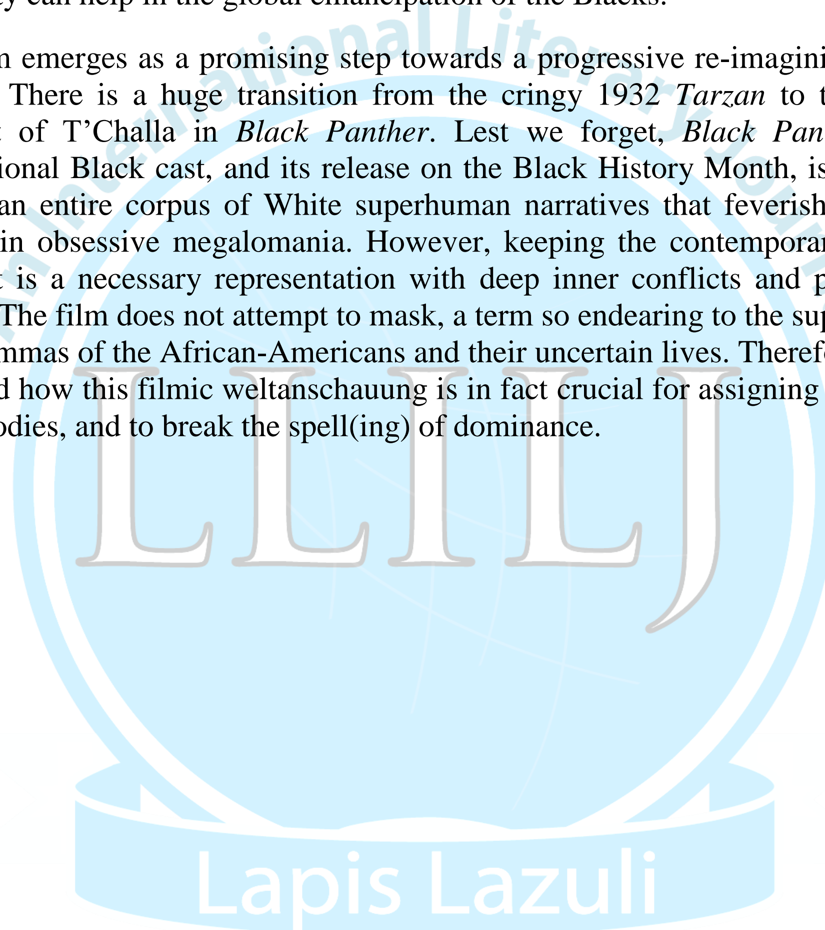
[9] It reminds us of a movement like *Black Lives Matter* on social media in 2013 after George Zimmerman fatally shot an African-American teen Trayvon Martin. As a response to it, the phrase "All Lives Matter" emerged, which demonstrated the racial dismissal of Blacks and denial of White supremacy.

International Literary Journal LLILJ Lapis Lazuli

Wakandans back into an "atavistic vein" (qtd. in *Pambazuka*) of a primeval past, which the film seemingly tries to undo. As the animation in the beginning shows, the complex history of Wakanda is reduced to simplistic spear fights and 'tribal' strife for gaining leadership.

Writing in a different context in 1985 about literary narratives, in her "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," Spivak has argued that imperialism produces a "worlding" (243) of the world, a kind of epistemic violence done on imperial subjects through Eurocentrism. *Black Panther* deconstructs the stability of a single monolithic paradigm of history, and disavows colonial axioms of knowledge, which refuse to acknowledge history from a different perspective. It attempts to interrogate the hermetically sealed categories of the coloniser and the colonised, where the former represented civility, rationality and masculinity and the latter barbarity, irrationality and infantile tendencies in the Western discourse. Furthermore, *Black Panther* shows that an African nation can thrive even without the white supremacist rule, and that black solidarity can help in the global emancipation of the Blacks.

The film emerges as a promising step towards a progressive re-imagining of African culture. There is a huge transition from the cringy 1932 *Tarzan* to the discerning intellect of T'Challa in *Black Panther*. Lest we forget, *Black Panther,* with an international Black cast, and its release on the Black History Month, is a single film amidst an entire corpus of White superhuman narratives that feverishly hail White culture in obsessive megalomania. However, keeping the contemporary zeitgeist in mind, it is a necessary representation with deep inner conflicts and profound back stories. The film does not attempt to mask, a term so endearing to the superhero genre, the dilemmas of the African-Americans and their uncertain lives. Therefore, this paper explored how this filmic weltanschauung is in fact crucial for assigning importance to black bodies, and to break the spell(ing) of dominance.



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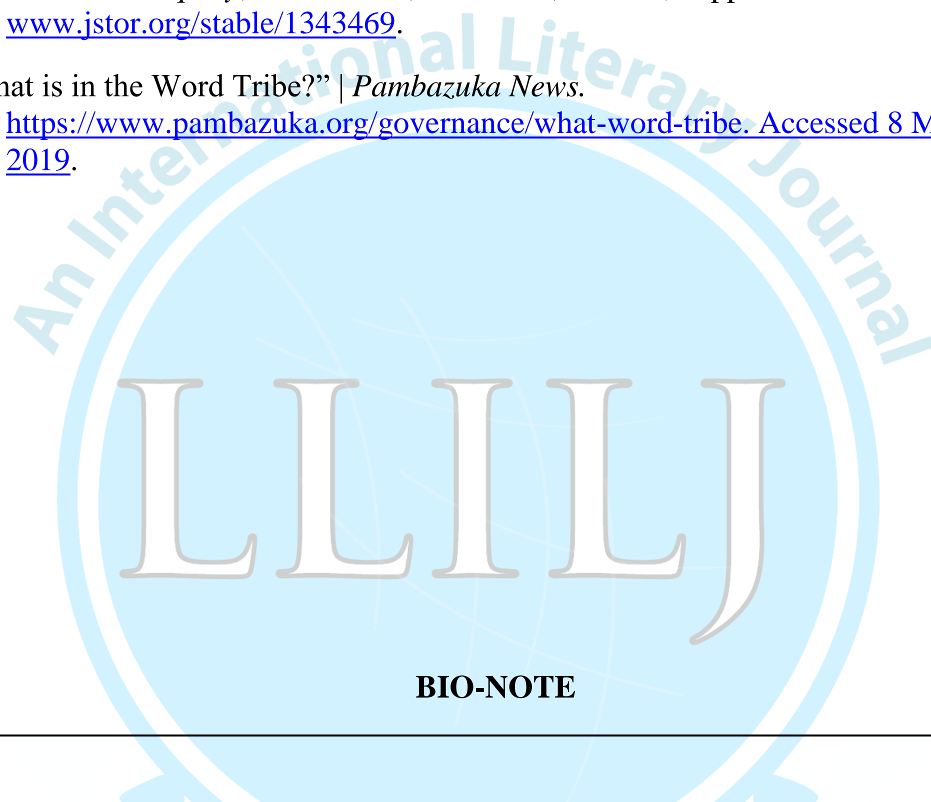

BIO-NOTE

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