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Embodied Masculine Sovereignty, Reimagined Femininity: Implications of a Soyinkaesque Reading of Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*

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In more ways than critics have mentioned, Ryan Coogler's critically acclaimed Black Panther *(2018) holds a vibrant conversation with Wole Soyinka's mythopoetic orientation. But apart from Ryan Coogler's ventriloquist reference to "The Fourth Stage,"* Black Panther *confers with Soyinka in many other interesting ways. In this article, I explore the mythic patterns in the movie by reading it alongside Soyinka's densely mythic essay, "The Fourth Stage," in order to pry the movie open for analysis. I posit that reading Ryan Coogler's* Black Panther *side-by-side Soyinka's "The Fourth Stage" amplifies the dialogic tension between violence and justice in both works, on the one hand, and exposes the strategies by which female subjectivity is reimagined in* Black Panther*'s radical universe, on the other hand. I also note that, in particular,* Black Panther *emerges from the comparative reading as somewhat inadvertently attempting a redefinition of tragedy.*

Keywords: Soyinka, *Black Panther*, Afro-futurism, patriarchy, tragedy, governmentality, masculinity, femininity

Ryan Coogler's acclaimed movie *Black Panther*[1] animates a vibrant conversation around Blackness, Africanness, and the nature of sovereignty and succession. Its way of doing this is through an appeal to mythology on some level. The homage one could pay such a brilliant work as *Black Panther* is indeed to vigorously mine it for every useful bit of insight into the future that it so deftly depicts. In this essay, I explore the mythic patterns in the movie by reading it alongside Soyinka's densely mythic essay "The Fourth Stage,"[2] in order to pry the movie open for analysis. I posit that reading Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* side by side Soyinka's "The Fourth Stage" amplifies the dialogic tension between violence and justice in both works, on the one hand, and exposes the strategies by which gender imbalance is compensated in *Black Panther*'s radical universe, on the other hand. I also note that, in particular, *Black Panther* emerges from this comparative reading as a somewhat unwitting redefinition of tragedy.

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1 *Black Panther*. Directed by Ryan Coogler. Burbank, CA: Marvel Studios, 2018. Netflix.

2 Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (London: Methuen, 1993).

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Significantly, *Black Panther*'s radical universe interfaces with Soyinka's mythopoetic universe as much as it establishes itself in the Afrofuturist genre. And the richness of Soyinka's oeuvre encourages wide applications such as this. Biodun Jeyifo—perhaps the most committed critic of Soyinka—urges a complex reading and broad application of Soyinka. In the final chapter of his painstakingly expansive reading of Soyinka entitled *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, and Postcolonialism*,[3] Jeyifo asserts that Soyinka's works are as rich as they are deep and call for "radical hermeneutic[s]."[4] To do justice to Soyinka's works is therefore "to read them complexly … as appertaining both to Africa and the developing world and the whole of humanity." [5] This prompts one to wonder what new insight will emerge when one maps Soyinka's mythopoesis onto the radical universe of *Black Panther.* Jeyifo further avers that in Soyinka's mythopoesis, the past, the present, and the future are coexistent, even coeval. In other words, in present times there are manifestations of the future and instantiations of the past. Soyinka corroborates this when he writes in "The Fourth Stage" that "life, present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn."[6] One of the basic tenets for appreciating futurist works is recognizing elements of the past and the present in the future it projects.[7] *Black Panther*, in this manner, makes itself legible within Soyinka's mythopoesis. This should allay worries about the movie's legitimacy as an Afrofuturist work. An instance of such anxieties is found in Ainehi Edoro and Bhakti Shringarpure's eloquent reading of the movie in an essay queryingly titled "Why is the cultural life of *Black Panther* so derivative?"[8] In the essay, they argue that Wakanda, the fictive African state portrayed in the movie, "is not futuristic enough." They assert that Wakanda "is too rooted in an Africa we already know and inhabit, and thus does not manage to take flight into the imaginary." Although that assertion is indeed true, it is not necessarily a shortcoming of the movie. Truly, the cultural elements in Wakanda are too familiar, so familiar that one tends to ask if the movie is indeed futuristic. I caution, however, that we engage the term *future* in its full capacity. By this I mean that the temporal nodes of past, present, and future are dynamic, in a useful way, and they should be engaged robustly. The past is the future of a period that time has dimmed, just as the present is the future of the past. In everyday parlance, yesterday was the tomorrow of the day before it, and today is the tomorrow of yesterday. Hence, the term *future* should be read carefully. In this vein, I suggest that *Black Panther* imagines the future of a different past. It asks:

3 Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, and Postcolonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

4 Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, and Postcolonialism*, 288.

5 Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, and Postcolonialism*, 288.

6 Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 29.

7 Some enlightening expositions on futuristic literature or science fiction that have stimulated this paper are as follows: Kodwo Eshun, "To Win the War, You Fought It Sideways: Kofi Laing's *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*," *We Travel the Space Ways: Black Imagination, Fragments and Diffractions*, eds. Henriette Gunkel and Kara lynch (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2019), 83–106; Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *The New Centennial Review* 3.2 (2003): 287–302; Moradewun Adejunmobi, "Introduction: African Science Fiction," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3.3 (2016): 265–72; and Eric Smith, *Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

8 Ainehi Edoro and Bhakti Shringapure, "Why Is the Cultural Life of *Black Panther* so Derivative?" Africasacountry. February 26, 2018. https://africasacountry.com/2018/02/africa-is-a-country-in-wakanda.

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What would the future look like of an African country that was never colonized and was endowed with a vital natural resource? The answer to that question is the wildly successful movie.

In the remainder of this essay, I outline instances of Ogunnian manifestations in Wakanda, the imagined glorious Black nation of the Black Panther and thereafter examine how *Black Panther* revisions leadership where charisma[9] (a combination of supernatural and exceptional talent and skills, charm and grace) and creativity converge. In the final brief segment, I trace what appears as an attempt at redefining tragedy.

* * *

In what he terms a voyage "through the mysteries of Ogun to the heart of Yoruba tragedy," Soyinka probes the nature of being. "The Fourth Stage" outlines the elements of tragic art that should be deemed universally applicable, in spite of his delineating it as Yoruba. Soyinka pays particular attention to Ogun, the Yoruba god of war, justice, artistic creativity, and technology. He asserts that Ogun, having the combined characteristics of Dyonisos, Apollo, and Prometheus, is the figure of transcendental, humane, and restorative justice—elements that must not be wanting in a tragic hero. Soyinka points out that understanding tragedy begins with the acceptance that the temporal nodes of past, present, and future are coexistent. They are the worlds of the ancestors (the past), the living (the present), and the unborn (the future), and the fourth stage is the moment of transition between each of these three stages.

The mythic foundation of Soyinka's theory reaches beyond either Ogun or Obatala, both gods invoked by Soyinka in his essay. Tejumola Olaniyan notes that the roots of Yoruba tragedy reach deep into the origin of the Yoruba pantheon. Olaniyan retells it neatly:

> Once upon a time there was only one being, the Original One, the Essence, assisted by a slave named Atunda (literally, re-creation). Atunda soon turned rebellious and one day rolled a mighty boulder on the first ancestor as he hoed his farm on a slope, shattering the Essence irretrievably into a thousand and one fragments. The Yoruba pantheon originated in this act of revolution. Some fragments became deities, each known by the character of the piece from the First One that constituted its being. The mortal shards, on the other hand, peopled the world of humanity. In no time the entities were separated by an unbridgeable gulf, which signaled the onset of a perpetual sense of incompletion on either side. It was, however, the gods who first contemplated conquering the abyss and fraternizing with humanity, their significant Other. But contemplation of this remedy is of a slightly different order from execution, and so one by one the deities despairingly confessed defeat before the fearful chasm. Until Ogun took over.[10]

That "present life contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn"[11] is because of Ogun's tragic dare, an act which unites all spheres of existence.

9 I use charisma here in the manner of Erica Edwards, see her book *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

10 Tejumola Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 47.

11 Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 29.

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The anguish occasioned by the "primal severance" of humans and gods, Soyinka posits, gave rise to a "primordial disquiet" in the human psyche. Ogun bridges the gulf between gods and humans, daring the chaotic abyss that Soyinka variously refers to as "chthonic realm," "seething cauldron of the dark world," "universal womb," "chasm," "transitional gulf," and "chthonic chaos." To be sure, Ogun's anguish egged him on to action:

> To act … channels anguish into a creative purpose which releases man from totally destructive despair, releasing from within him the most energetic, deeply combative inventions which, without usurping the territory of the infernal gulf, bridges it with visionary hope.[12]

The tragic hero courts tragedy not to satisfy himself, but by recognizing that the path to wholesome life winds through self-sacrifice does the tragic hero embark on the journey toward communal redemption. Only after having undergone this sort of journey, a fragmentation of sorts, does the hero lay bare the intricate relatedness of destructiveness and creativeness. Thus, having fulfilled the tragic role, the tragic hero does become an embodiment of both contradictions, for in the will to self-destruct lies the purpose to create. Soyinka puts it thus:

> Only one who has himself undergone the experience of disintegration, whose spirit has been tested and whose psychic resources laid under stress by the forces most inimical to individual assertion, only he can understand and be the force of fusion between the two contradictions.[13]

In a nutshell, the tragic hero should possess qualities of Prometheus, Dionysos, and Apollo. The tragic hero should be ecstatic and daring, willing to take the path of sacrifice for common good and able to embody the contradictions of destructiveness and creativity. Although *Black Panther* is, ostensibly, not a tragedy, it is readable in accordance with "The Fourth Stage" because both, in their respective senses, grapple with the question of being. There are at least two characters in *Black Panther* troubled by the burden of being Wakandan. T'Challa and Killmonger insistently argue about the essence of being Wakandan and the responsibility of that being—does being Wakandan make them judge, jury, and executioner of other people or not? Neither of them, however—and no other character in the movie—fully steps into the shoes of Ogun, although they become figures of Ogun at intervals.

Thrice in the movie do characters transit to the ancestral plane. T'Challa visits the realm of the ancestors during his installation as king and during his resuscitation after a momentary defeat by Killmonger, and Killmonger transits to the ancestral plane once during his installation as king. Soyinka's assertion that "present life contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn" comes to mind again. The transition fulfills two purposes. It brings the king in conversation with his predecessors, and it completes the necessary ritual of kingship that starts first with the moment of tragic daring in the form of a ritual combat for the throne. Momentarily, thus, T'Challa

12 Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 30–31.
13 Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 32–33.

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and Killmonger appear as the form of Ogun, as bridges between the living and ancestors and gods. But they fulfill this ritual to personal ends.

Ogun, Soyinka tells us, is known for "transcendental, humane [and] rigidly restorative justice," but inasmuch as T'Challa and Killmonger are self-serving, they cannot dispense this sort of justice. I propose that the two obvious candidates for Ogun do not rise to his stature. T'Challa is too nationalistic to dispense Ogunnian justice. Eventually, he extends Wakanda's benevolence to the rest of the world, but that happens after Killmonger has died. In fact, in the one instance he seeks to play the Ogunnian role of defending the downtrodden in his intervention of a Boko Haram convoy in Sambisa, he falters at the sight of his lover in the manner of Elesin-Oba, the tragic character in Soyinka's quintessential tragic drama, *Death and the King's Horseman.*[14] Releasing himself to the pleasures of a young woman's company, Elesin-Oba miscalculates his departure for the world beyond. He tragically delays in fulfilling his call to self-sacrifice for community's sake and witnesses his son's death occasioned by the need to keep the family's honor intact. In that same manner, on beholding his girlfriend, T'Challa freezes "like an antelope in headlights,"[15] saved only by the timely intervention of Okoye, the army general. Killmonger does not also measure up not because he is a villain but because he does not successfully channel his anguish toward creativity. His is retributive justice. His drive for vengeance beclouds his agitation for a better life for the myriad of oppressed Black people on the planet. His investment in the plight of the oppressed, one would argue, arises from deep-seated rage at the murder of his father and his abandonment in the United States.

Vibranium is another element of "The Fourth Stage" present in *Black Panther.* It readily stands as a symbol of Ogun. CIA Agent Ross, representing ubiquitous America in the movie, calls it the strongest metal material on earth. It is also the material from which Wakanda's weapons are made. We do know through Soyinka that metal is the artifact of Ogun. It reinforces the idea that both T'Challa (jointly with his sister Shuri) and Killmonger stand as figures of Ogun, for they totally control the use of the metal. Vibranium is Wakanda's source of wealth and technological advancement as well as its weapon of war. The Black Panther suit, we learn, is made of vibranium. Quite literally, thus, the figure wearing the suit and controlling the use of the strongest metal on earth invokes Ogun. To compound this one instance, in Wakanda vibranium is transported by means of magnetic levitation through a deep abyss evocative of what Soyinka calls the chthonic realm, universal womb, and chasm. The theatrical version of the movie does create for the viewer an illusion of plunging into an abyss when they are introduced to Shuri's laboratory. Shuri is T'Challa's younger sister and the tech genius of Wakanda. In this abyss resides the technological wonder of magnetic levitation, and from it issues forth the latest update to the newest vibranium-inspired technological wonder. It does make sense, within the precincts of this Soyinkaesque reading, that CIA Agent Ross is healed of bullet wounds in this chasm and that the final battle between T'Challa and Killmonger happens in this space.

"The Fourth Stage" indeed offers an interesting reading of *Black Panther* and the world that it portrays. To be sure, Wakanda is desirable as it is, and it is indeed enough

14 Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (London: Methuen, 1998).
15 Okoye makes this statement in *Black Panther.*

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that the rulers of Wakanda possess only a bit of Ogun and not all of him. Attending both *Black Panther* and Soyinka with the seriousness that they deserve, however, warrants an examination of the contradictions inherent in both. Ogun, in his many reimaginations—in this case as T'Challa or Killmonger—is not an unproblematic figure. Jeyifo cautions against ignoring the ambivalence of Ogun in order to chase after the "textual commentary afforded by Soyinka's unqualified theoretical endorsement of the 'Ogunnian' archetype."[16] He observes that Soyinka himself recognizes the trouble with reclaiming mythic warrior-heroes as paradigms for the figure of the artist, or, to stretch it enough, the leader. Jeyifo especially identifies that the Ogunnian archetype implies that radical subjectivity is both patrician and patriarchal. (I will revisit this assertion in the next section.) In addition to this is the question of balancing Ogun's propensity for violence with his creative purpose.

Ogun's overstep at the battle of Ìrè accounts for the profound ambivalence of the god of iron, war, and creativity.[17] After having accepted to be king over the people of Ìrè, he led them to victory in battle. But at the battle of Ìrè, he drank too much wine and, in his drunken fury, slaughtered not just his enemies but also the warriors whom he had led to war. Soyinka does not fully resolve the problem in the constitution of Ogun, the tension between destruction and creativity, as Jeyifo notes. It appears that to temper the violence of Ogun, Soyinka ascribes creativity to him. The similarity of Ogun to T'Challa and Killmonger surfaces best on the level of violence and justice, and *Black Panther* finds another way to account for creativity.

What emerges in this comparative reading of *Black Panther* and "The Fourth Stage" is the interesting question of leadership. What should leadership look like if Africa's present situation is reimagined, and does *Black Panther* provide a convincing figure of that leader? Here is where attention turns to a vigorous reading of the tensions in the leader figure, mythic (like Ogun) or fictive (like T'Challa and Killmonger).

* * *

It is at this juncture where Ogun finds channels in T'Challa and Killmonger that one arrives at some useful insight into the constitution of leadership, both in Wakanda and in Africa. It serves the purpose of analysis at this point to simplify the form of leadership typified by Ogun as charisma. This simplification allows for a deeper appreciation of the nature and structure of leadership. Charisma, although divinely or supernaturally endowed, is embodied. It therefore projects the leader's body as a site for political longing. In this framework, leadership position and power become the site of "a type of … masculine authority based in imitation, succession, and perfectibility."[18] In the charismatic masculine leader figure is a convergence of the aspirations and dreams of all other subjects. The leader's vicarious projection of followers' aspirations and dreams is rapturously cathartic—very often defying rationalization.

16 See Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, and Postcolonialism*, 284–85.

17 There are various recounts of this battle, which Soyinka alludes to in "The Fourth Stage." The version I refer to here is in Yaw Adu-Gyamfi, "Wole Soyinka's 'Dawn' and the Cults of Ogun," *A Review of International English Literature* 28.4 (1997): 73–89.

18 Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, 39.

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Accordingly, the first Black Panther was a male warrior led to the heart-shaped herb that granted him superhuman strength, speed, and instincts. Supernaturally endowed, "the warrior became king and the first Black Panther," a griot tells a child in the opening sequence of *Black Panther*. There appears no bridge between the warrior's endowment and his ascension to the throne. Supernatural strength, speed, and instincts sum up the terms on which Wakandans would like to conduct their battles and diplomatic relations with other nations around them. Wakandans' delight in and subjection to their leader is to the extent that *he* embodies the ideals that they seek. Through the leader's body, they could imagine their victories and advancement.

The problem with charisma-based leadership is often that it does not self-regulate and self-correct. Within this leadership framework, there is no indicator of excesses inasmuch as the charismatic leader takes *his* followers' devotion for granted and keeps projecting their aspirations. This embodied sovereignty induces easy forgiveness of excesses. Very often, too, the instruments of checks and balances lose traction, and power and authority become unidirectional. There is an almost negligible instance of this in *Black Panther*. Because T'Challa is portrayed as a benevolent monarch and features as the insuperable Black body, the viewer could easily forgive his excesses; moreover, everything works in Wakanda. The first time T'Challa meets his father in the realm of the ancestors, his father mentions that T'Challa is a good man and needs to be strong because it is difficult for a good man to be king. This idea of a benevolent monarch ought to be questioned, and it is indeed questioned through T'Challa, for he betrays some of the faults for which many African leaders are being taken to task. When Killmonger, T'Challa's cousin, arrives in Wakanda to challenge him to battle, T'Challa would have imprisoned him despite knowing the truth about him. His order to incarcerate Killmonger coincides with the revelation, in council, that Killmonger does have a right to the throne. Little could be said then of T'Challa's benevolence—nay, charisma—if, despite condemning others from keeping the truth from him, he attempts to conceal the truth about his cousin from members of his council.

Events in Africa substantiate the foregoing observations. Cameroon, Uganda, and until recently Zimbabwe have been ruled by the same leader for years. In cases where power changes hands, as in the case of Togo, it remains in the ruling family. In these countries, and many others, critics of government are being muzzled. They disappear mysteriously, as is being reported in Rwanda recently,[19] or they are thrown into jail. Because the president, in most cases, doubles as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, he could marshal the forces against his foes with little or no inhibition. Not long ago, members of a Nigerian security agency forcibly entered into an activist's home to arrest and detain him, blatantly ignoring the tenets of the laws of the country. In many of these African countries, the president rides to power on his appeal to his followers' dreams. In the case of Nigeria, not only does the president chief-command the armed forces, but he (has always been a "he") also controls the nation's resources.

Not to be discountenanced is Jeyifo's observation of the patriarchal nature of the form of leadership that Ogun represents. *Black Panther* arguably emphasizes a

19 Kara Fox, "Opposition Members Keep Going 'Missing' in Rwanda. Few Expect Them to Return," CNN.com. July 27, 2019. https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/27/africa/rwanda-opposition-disappearances-intl/index.html.

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Killmonger oversees the destruction of the heart-shaped herb.

patriarchal order through its ritual combat in which bare-chested able-bodied men battle for the throne. Baring male bodies at combat in full view of followers could in fact be a form of pageantry, a display of potential leaders of the people. Indwelling the bodies after ritual combats is the power of the Black Panther transmitted through the heart-shaped herb. The heart-shaped herb marks authority, entrance into the order of kingship established by the first male warrior and king, and the right to control violence and dispense justice. In short, it marks the sovereignty of the ruler, until he is challenged to a ritual combat. Killmonger's cinematically enhanced iconic masculine pose at his initiation as king (see image)[20] portrays the energetic—and, certainly, virile—male candidate for the throne. This example is but one instance of the pageantry in the movie. Two other male candidates for the throne are displayed this way: T'Challa, prince and heir to the throne, whose Black body proves impervious to death and decay, and M'Baku, leader of the isolated Jabari tribe. Apart from the profound complexity of the tragic villain that Killmonger is, his body powerfully animates a drive for social justice, literally. He demands justice for his abandonment in the United States by his people and bears on his body scars reminding him of the many people he has killed in the service of the United States, scars intended to drive him to vengeance. These scars as well as his lip tattoo bring him in proximity to the throne, on the one hand, and bolster his qualification to lead the fight against racial injustice, on the other hand. But as the problem is with the constitution of Ogun, for Killmonger, the line blurs between vengeful fury and constructive violence.

Where the path to the throne is through an able-bodied masculine figure, one is left only to conjectures about the possibility of a female ruler in Wakanda or a tragic heroine in Soyinka's imagination. At this point commence the divergent routes of Coogler and Soyinka. For Soyinka, Ogun's creativity tempers and underplays his propensity for violence. This could be why Soyinka relates Ogun to the revolutionary artist rather than a leader and understates his tenure as king of Ìrè. Ogun's vision certainly includes women but only to the extent that the inclusion emphasizes Ogun's radical intervention in defense of the downtrodden. In other words, Ogun indirectly subalternates the woman.

20 *Black Panther*, 1:29:30.

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For Coogler, there is a wide range of possibilities for the representation of women manifested in at least three forms, each designating a retrieval of womanhood from a patriarchal order without entirely freeing them from patriarchy but complexly suggesting the possibility of women's advancement. The first form in which the woman appears in *Black Panther* is as the suffering mother through whose fortitude the nation is born. T'Challa's mother characterizes this trope. Figures like her populate African and African American literature. I evoke two iterations of this trope from African literature: Nandi, mother of Chaka, the legendary emperor of Zululand,[21] and Oreame, grandmother of Ozidi in J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's *The Ozidi Saga.*[22] From African American literature, Mira and her progenitor Candace in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*[23] come to mind. The suffering mother figure in these works, who also doubles as mother of the nation, suffers vicariously through her son, whose encounter with adversarial forces almost terminates him. The suffering mother becomes mother of the nation only through the triumph of her son. Coogler further recasts female fortitude as brawn and bravery, retrieving the woman from the sidelines of battles. The woman in battle plays a definite defensive role in the political modernity of the Africa envisioned in the movie. In this regard, the Dora Milaje—the retinue of soldiers guarding the king of Wakanda—and Nakia, T'Challa's girlfriend and Wakandan spy in Nigeria, stand out. The third representation of the woman in *Black Panther* is as the creative essence, which Soyinka assigned to Ogun. This reimagination of the woman is perhaps the most important, in that it most closely complements the masculine leader's noted ferocity. T'Challa's younger sister, worthily, takes this place. She designs and updates the Black Panther suit and also sustains the technology of Wakanda. She exerts the power of life and death differently from T'Challa, for although T'Challa controls violence by sheer brawn and supernaturally endowed agility, Shuri reserves the power not just to create but also to fortify and heal, and she does fortify T'Challa with a bulletproof suit and heal CIA Agent Ross.

Indeed, this reassignment of power indicates that female leadership in Wakanda is not foreclosed, even if one wonders why the movie stops short of imagining it. Downcast by the supposed death of her son T'Challa and wary of aligning with M'Baku, leader of the Jabari tribe, the queen-mother urges Nakia to drink a tea made from the heart-shaped herb, which she plucked before Killmonger orders its destruction. Nakia's response highlights her disadvantages. She argues from the standpoint of reason and not to signal her disqualification. Of course, this could be read as an ambivalence of the film regarding female leadership. Another instance of this ambivalence happens earlier. At the first ritual combat, when the priest, Zuri, asks if any of the royal house wishes to challenge T'Challa for the throne, a cry of shock escapes all gathered when Shuri raises her hand only to urge that the ritual be hastened. This untimely intervention in the proceedings is an equivocation, much like testing the waters with the followers, although in the end it provokes laughter and seems an attempt at humor. Barring these instances of ambivalence, a female ruler seems altogether not unthinkable in Wakanda. Again, the reimagination of femininity in the movie sponsors this conclusion. The three

21 Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka* (London: Heinemann, 1981).
22 J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, *The Ozidi Saga* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1991).
23 Pauline Hoplins, *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004).

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manifestations of the woman in Wakanda renders the male leader figure almost redundant, the only impediment for the woman being her ability to participate in the ritual combat. I suggest that the reimagination of femininity in *Black Panther* does more. It also inadvertently gestures toward a reconfiguration of tragedy, and I elaborate on this briefly in the next section.

* * *

Simplifying supernatural strength as charisma, as I have done in the foregoing section, has revealed that sovereignty is embodied by masculine subjects in the political modernity of Wakanda and certainly in Ogun's tenure as king of Ìrè. However, charisma as a mobilizing tool is not undesirable. Some charisma is needed for the leader to mobilize followers' compliance with modes of governmentality. Problems arise when charisma in its many bodily expressions is not complemented and enriched by creativity. This, perhaps, is material for reimagining tragedy.

Although *Black Panther* does not tell a tragic story, it presents to us a tragic character dressed as a villain. Killmonger's indignation is directed at Wakanda for three justifiable reasons: his father's death in the hand of T'Challa's father, his abandonment in the diaspora, and Wakanda's reluctance to use vibranium to avenge historic wrongs done to Black people all over the world. Killmonger's plight will resonate with the diasporic African subject pried away from Africa through the Atlantic slave trade or through contemporary forces of globalization. Killmonger makes a forceful argument for the estranged lot of Black people and intervenes to fight for them. One of the most powerful presentations of Killmonger as a hero occurs at the end of his final battle with T'Challa. Realizing that he is dying, he rejects T'Challa's offer of healing with a very evocative line: "Just bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships, because they knew death was better than bondage."[24]

Further troubling Killmonger's portrayal as a villain is the historical significance of his origins traced not only temporally but also spatially. At once, Killmonger triggers many conversations with the past of the Black subject in America. Not least of these triggers is his link to Oakland, California—home of the Black Panther Party. Killmonger's self-reliance, however, proves to be his hubris. Having prepared himself for his mission of vengeance to Wakanda, he sets off for Wakanda to vie for the throne, alone. Whereas T'Challa's creativity finds expression through his sister and complements his strength and agility, in Killmonger one finds brawn alone. He sets off on the path to downfall by not recognizing his incompleteness and not seeing the necessity for a creative edge to his rage. His drive for vengeance leads him along the unproductive path of fury, destroying potential allies and enemies in his path.

The key to this reimagination of tragedy lies in the reimagination of femininity. The chain of events that leads to his arrival in Wakanda starts with his helping Ulysses Klaue, a perennial foe of Wakanda, to steal a misidentified Wakandan artifact in the British Museum. His girlfriend and accomplice proves integral to the success of the theft, but Killmoger wrathfully kills her along with Klaue. Killmonger's nonrealization of his incompleteness and his need for the reimagined woman figure is often misread as

24 *Black Panther*, 1:56:57–1:58:34.

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misogyny. This undiscerning stance activates his tragedy, and that distinctly differentiates him from T'Challa. Where T'Challa's women consolidate and complement his strength, Killmonger kills off his own women. T'Challa's salvation from a tragic death arises from the concerted intervention of his mother (the suffering woman/mother of the nation), Nakia (the female warrior), and Shuri (the creative force). Tragedy looms for the warrior-hero where this order of complementarity is upset. *Black Panther* reimagines tragedy in this manner.

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I have argued in this essay that setting up Coogler's *Black Panther* in conversation with Soyinka's "The Fourth Stage" emphasizes, on the one hand, the inherent tension between violence and justice, and illuminates *Black Panther*'s means of compensating for present gender imbalance in the distribution and performance of power, on the other hand. In addition, this reading reveals the movie's subtle attempt at reordering the parameters for tragedy. Of course, my outline of a tragic thread in the constitution of Killmonger is not definitive. In fact, it departs somewhat from the overall path of Ogunnian tragedy. Nevertheless, it may just be about time to think the feminine figure not only into the constitution of leadership but also into the definition of tragedy.

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