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Postcolonial Critique in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*

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The article addresses two aspects of postcolonial critique in Black Panther*: first, its portrayal of the allure of grand statements in the cultivation of conspicuous and persistent self-regard in societies that wish to be recognizably independent, and second the centrality of repeatedly embodied material gestures and motions for the sustenance of enduring communal self-regard. These two prominent features of storytelling in the film, it will be argued, offer a powerful criticism of indifferent, ideology free, and barely disguised fatalism that has driven notions of freedom across the world since the collapse of the old Soviet Union. Storytelling in* Black Panther *enjoys global acclaim because it revivifies the life-affirming value of high stakes, unabashedly teleological grand narratives, even as it upholds the political valency of strident, non-oppositional difference.*

Keywords: Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons*, Ryan Coogler, Black Panther, postcolonial critique, grand narratives, ritual

During the week my autumn 2018 world literature class was going to discuss Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*, Omoyele Sowore, a New York–based publisher of Nigerian descent visited several cities in the state of Ohio in the United States to canvass the support of fellow "abroadians" for his campaign for election as the next president of Nigeria. Like *Black Panther*'s Erik Killmonger, Sowore is self-confident, brave, and believes that his home country in Africa ought to be doing much more for itself and the world. Unlike Killmonger, this candidate has never served in the armed forces of any country, although he has been in several life-threatening political scrapes in Nigeria.[1] The Nigerian publisher is brought up at the beginning of this article to call attention to how the mythical quality of the transcontinental representations of Wakandan affairs in Coogler's film belies the topicality of its engagements. The film's heavily stylized

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1 In the six months between the original drafting of this article and the uploading of the final, peer reviewed, in October 2019, Mr. Sowore (publisher of saharareporters.com) contested and lost the February 23, 2019, election. He continued his activism by planning a mass protest hashtagged #revolutionow. (The movement's Facebook page has the following words of Angela Davis to summarize its goal: "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.") The Nigerian government arrested Sowore for treason on August 3, 2019, and has kept him in detention ever since. On more than one occasion, his applications for bail have either been denied outright or granted with conditions that stand no practical chance of being met.

mythography will be interpreted in this paper as a direct invitation to examine the contents of its allegorical significations on global postcolonial life. Although the story may have originated from the pages of a popular American comic series, the tenor of its themes derives from, and speaks to, contentions about the nature of effectual tropes of processing and understanding the world as postcolonial.

The following discussion analyzes *Black Panther*'s approach to two elements of postcolonial critique: its alluring portrayal of grand *statements* in the cultivation of conspicuous and persistent self-regard in societies that wish to be recognizably independent, and its depiction of the centrality of repeatedly *embodied material gestures and motions* for the sustenance of enduring communal self-regard. For elucidating the first, the paper interprets the several invocations of "our way" by beset Wakanda rulers to be a deliberately open-ended expression of the sense of ends and purpose by which the hegemonic nation will evaluate significant acts. The interpretation locates Wakanda's telos management byword, "our way," within postcolonial discourse by tracing its antetextual provenance in Ayi Kwei Armah's stipulations of "the Way" in the metafictional *Two Thousand Seasons*. For the discussion of the material conflicts that the allegedly nation-Way is believed capable of resolving amicably, the second aspect of postcolonial critique taken up in this paper, the focus will be on the self-conscious iterations of ritualized bloodletting in Wakanda regime-change protocols. These two prominent features of storytelling in the film offer a powerful criticism of indifferent, ideology free, and barely disguised fatalism that has driven notions of freedom across the world since the collapse of the old Soviet Union. Storytelling in *Black Panther* enjoys global acclaim because it revivifies the life-affirming value of high stakes, unabashedly teleological, grand narratives, even as it upholds the political valency of strident, non-oppositional difference.

To forestall a potential misunderstanding, it is being noted here at the beginning that the paper does not propose that Ryan Coogler's Wakanda is a literal postcolonial state; no foreign country ever owned, or governed, the territory. The paper deploys *postcoloniality* as a broad term that captures a tendency of organizing and interpreting relations among peoples and nations. The kernel of that tendency, articulated most forcefully in Asian and African post-1945 anticolonial discourses, is best summarized in the question, Can the "wholly other" be embraced ethically?[2] But even so, no trained watcher would miss the film's postcolonial references, some blatant and others more subtle. Shuri's calling the recuperating CIA agent, Everett Ross, a "colonizer" is very obvious. A not so manifestly postcolonial reference occurs toward the end of the art heist episode at the British Museum, when Erik Killmonger stops at the display case of a long-horned animal mask that is covered in the pale blue of vibranium, the highly prized, resilient material over which Wakanda enjoys a fiercely guarded monopoly. His eyes shining brightly with greed, Klaue asks, "You're not telling me that's vibranium, too?"

2 The phrasing is from Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 384. The other, however it is conceived, should be deemed to have the right to not reciprocate being embraced: "Ethical singularity is approached when responses flow from both sides. Otherwise, the idea, that if the person I am doing good to resembles me and has my rights, he or she will be better off, does not begin to disclose-efface the (im)possible ethical relation." Although Coogler's Wakanda does not include formal colonization in its official historical recollections, the legacy of enslavement and displacement of its people, as well as the deracination this engendered, are embodied narratively in Killmonger's return.

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and Killmonger dissembles the truth with a curt answer, "Nah, I'm just *feeling* it." The very brief, seemingly throwaway exchange is perhaps the most revealing allusion to postcolonial critique in the film. The reference recalls Senghor's many reflections on masks and African genius.[3] His selling the dummy of "feeling" to the crassly materialist Klaue injects negritude metaphysics into the ethics of art nabbing that the scene enacts. By invoking "feeling" Killmonger misdirects Klaue, for whom feeling has no resale value. Later in Busan, Killmonger uses the mask again as a disguise that, along with the royal ring he wore on his necklace, does not fool T'Challa. It is not hard to see Killmonger's instrumental usage of masks as a direct rebuttal of negritude's aestheticization of objects. Nonetheless, it cannot be forgotten that feeling is the denominator of Killmonger's monomaniacal drive: avenging a father's death as well as seizing the global control of vibranium supply and know-how for the purpose of fomenting a selfless worldwide revolution.

Difference and Opposition in Postcolonial Studies

One major location of viewer pleasure in *Black Panther* is its unapologetic assertions of difference that do not predicate the independence aspirations of a people of African descent on the grudging magnanimity of others. In this film, where one African thing stands freely, other entities, African or not, stand by it unless provoked into opposition. Kites perch and egrets perch; and the one who seeks to prevent the other from flying may expect to have its wings broken. In the film's chronology of events, the era of Africans having to wage physical wars for bare existence has receded into prehistory. Triumphant being in Wakanda's self-conception insists on the freedom to be left alone to be different. Interactions preferred in the narrative indicate that wanting to be (or being persuaded to want to be) like others brings no worthy benefit.[4] Although the ambition of nations and cultures driven by nullifying opposition presses heavily on Wakanda, its dominant motivation for freedom comes from internal, intellectually self-sufficient, historically accumulated wisdom and interests. T'Challa's trials of power express most forcefully that national will to be independently different, and his speaking for the correctness of "our Way" when policy divisions arise within the ruling council renders the idea in a formulaic, but arresting, manner.

Insistent defenses of difference abound—we might even call them definitive—in postcolonial reason. I have selected for comparison Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* partly because the heavy racial binarism of its historiographic metafiction was once

3 Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Negritude*, trans. Chike Jeffers (London: Seagull, 2011), 45–136.

4 *Black Panther* was released within a milieu of early twenty-first-century "Africa Rising," Black globalism —for example, "Afropolitanism," "migritude," "Afropeanism"—in which self-conscious individuals claim African belongingness but free of the explicit liberation seeking proclamations that drove antislavery, anticolonial, civil rights, and anticapitalist movements of earlier times. For "Africa Rising," see Rita Kiki Edozie, *"Pan" Africa Rising: The Cultural Political Economy of Nigeria's Afri-Capitalism and South Africa's Ubuntu Business* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Eva Rask Knudsen and Ull Rahbek render a comprehensive overview of Afropolitanism in *In Search of the Afropolitan: Encounters, Conversations, and Contemporary Diasporic African Literature* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016). And Haskell's article "Plotting Migritude" is a good introduction to migritude; see Rosemary Haskell, "Plotting Migritude: Variations of the Bildungsroman in Fatou Diome's *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* and *Celles qui attendant*," *South Atlantic Review* 81.1 (2016): 136–55.

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revealingly characterized as comic or cartoonish.[5] But more than that, Armah's novel is the most appropriate postcolonial pretext with which to read Coogler's film because its storytelling direction ends in an ideological spot that foregrounds Erik Killmonger's oppositional conception of difference, the view of global relations that *Black Panther* fights, defeats, and buries in the Wakanda hills. The very energetic group of young seers from whose perspective the narrative ending is framed in *Two Thousand Seasons*, being at the beginning of the reconstruction of their country's independent ways, glorifies oppositional difference as Killmonger does. Placed on the same timeline, T'Challa's reign, at a time Wakanda's national identity seems to have been consolidated, is a millennium to the future of the system of global relations that could only be wished for at the end of Armah's novel. Within this comparatist, postcolonial, perspective, the nativist defense of the nation propagated by Killmonger sounds anachronistic. His program fails to take root because the regime in place has created a working apparatus; we may call it a grand narrative, whose greatest realization shines brightly in Wakanda's organization of its past, present, and future into a coherent instrument of generating and regulating ambition. T'Challa refers to that instrument as "our way," the same phrasing—"the Way"—that Armah's self-conscious, storytelling seers used to summarize similar ideas about Anoa, their fictional nation. In Anoa and Wakanda, assertions of the right to be different, never *completely* essential and always *strategic*, are always based on historical experiences and always successfully deployed against the imperialism of singularity, a project that often fails because history often proves it false. As it were, the future wished for in Armah's story is already accomplished in Tchalla's Wakanda in ways that cannot accommodate Killmonger's conception of nationalist trajectory.

Wars of Ways in Coogler's Wakanda

The following conversation occurred during a daytime, leisurely, stroll that T'Challa and Nakia took through a marketplace with Idrissa Soumaoro's sprightly "Bèrèbèrè" playing in the background. Elevated trains glide through the air above the crowd of sellers and buyers of an assortment of wares that range from handheld holographic communication devices to freshly roasted meat.

T'Challa: Come home, Nakia.
Nakia: I'm right here.
T'Challa: Stay.
Nakia: I came to support you and to honor your father. But I can't stay. I found my calling out there. I've seen too many in need just to turn a blind eye. I can't be happy here knowing that there's people out there who have nothing.
T'Challa: What would you have Wakanda do about it?
Nakia: Share what we have. We could provide aid and access to technology and refuge to those who need it. Other countries do it, we could do it better.
T'Challa: We are not like these other countries, Nakia. If the world found out what we truly are, what we possess, we could lose *our way* of life.

5 See, for example, Bernth Lindfors, "Armah's Histories," *African Literature Today* 11 (1980): 85–96, and Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet, On Creation Day: Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

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Nakia: Wakanda is strong enough to help others and protect *ourselves* at the same time.

The difference between "way" and "selves" is important in this conversation. T'Challa's "way" refers to governing systems of acquisition and distribution. Nakia's "selves" alludes to civil, individual freedoms. The two lovers speak of different things and envisage different consequences. T'Challa worries about preserving Wakanda's culture of resolute difference and the national ethos of enjoying the right of *all* people to be left alone. Nakia's confidence is about the strength of Wakanda to protect its citizens against physical capture. She believes that ethical, ameliorative resource exchange could be done free of political impositions of "ways."

Shortly after the marketplace policy banter, T'Challa consults W'Kabi, leader of the frontier community and fiancé of Okoye, commander of the Dora Milaje, Wakanda's elite fighting force:

T'Challa: Nakia thinks we should be doing more.
W'Kabi: More, like what?
T'Challa: Foreign aid, refugee programs.
W'Kabi: You let the refugees in, they bring their problems with them. And then Wakanda is like everywhere else. Now if you said you wanted me and my men to go out there and clean up the world, then I'll be all for it.
T'Challa: But waging war on other countries has never been *our way*.

The king and the citizen soldier are not speaking of the same idea. The king's "our way" is an abstraction, a totalization, of Wakanda's official sense of itself in the world. W'Kabi, however, refers confidently to the supreme competence of the specific sphere assigned to him. As it is with Nakia, Wakanda's technical know-how about neutralizing the threat of physical (corporeal) capture by others is, in W'akabi's mind, beyond question.

Talks about "the way" returned to reckoning when King T'Challa asked Zuri, one-time spy and now head of the council of king-makers and custodian of the heart-shaped herbarium, to explain the mystery of Killmonger and was answered thus:

> Your uncle fell in love with an American woman. They had a child. The hardships he saw there radicalized your uncle. … Their leaders have been assassinated. Communities flooded with drugs and weapons. They are overly policed and incarcerated. All over the planet *our people* suffer because they don't have the tools to fight back. With vibranium weapons, they could overthrow every country and Wakanda could rule them all *the right way*. He knew your father would not support this. So, your uncle betrayed us. No! He helped Klaue steal the vibranium.

Later in the story, Killmonger, channeling the same type of sympathy that resulted in his father's assassination, invokes belligerent difference to justify his berating the Wakanda royal court for "sittin' up here comfortable" when countless kin "that looks like *us*" wallows in hardship all over the globe. T'Challa rebuffs him with the official line of non-oppositional difference: "Our weapons will not be used to wage war on the world. It is not *our way* to be judge, jury and executioner for people who are *not our own*."

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At the first cabinet meeting over which he presided after gaining the throne, Killmonger decreed global oppositional difference into a state policy and ordered Wakandan intelligence gathering operatives all over the world to "arm oppressed people" with vibranium "so they can finally rise up and kill those in power." He closed the proclamation effusively: "We're warriors! The world's gonna start over, and this time, we're on top. The sun will never set on the Wakandan empire." Against this unprecedented opposition command, General Okoye, speaking in a cautiously raised voice of compliant protest, advised: "Wakanda has survived for so long by *fighting when only absolutely necessary*."[6] The schism within the ruling bloc blows out in the open when, later, W'Kabi publicly renounced Okoye, his fiancée.

Stirring the core of policy and ideological debates discussed previously is the proper way to administer the gains of the single commodity (vibranium) economy in a world under the sway of postcolonial calculations. To Killmonger, the nation-state in a postcolonial world must respond to its environment in measures that match the lot the world deals to it; the essential opposition that nurtured colonization and enslavement in the historical world that Wakanda shares with others must be serviced by even the free and liberated. For T'Challa, true sovereignty radiates from contemplative, interior motivations as they have been processed within national historical experience. Hence, nature's gift in the form of vibranium is to be refined and used in accordance with national necessities as daily living demands. The most productive use of difference, for T'Challa, is that which satisfies national need. Within the framework of his interpretation of Wakanda national traditions, other people deserve their freestanding room. Bellicose difference cannot nurture morally satisfying reciprocity.

Wars of Ways in Armah's Anoa

Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* belongs in the group of stories that set the defining parameters of late-twentieth-century "mourning-after" novels of post-independence disillusionment: nominally decolonized national setting, thoroughly dissatisfying leadership cadre, overwhelming decay, flickers of hope, usually expressed symbolically.[7] The main interest in Armah's novel here is not the theme of melancholic freedom but the glaring similarity between its main denomination of enduring optimism—"our way, the way"—and *Black Panther*'s. The novel's fictional country, Anoa, lost its way for an entire millennium because it abandoned vigilant reciprocity. In the allegory of nationalist, anticolonial, anti-slavery history writing proposed by the self-conscious consortium of battle-tested, recently successful slave ship mutineers, who narrate the story, the millennium of necessary national reconstruction will succeed to the extent that the builders do not forget the main tenets of the country's "way." If the builders repeat past errors by not doing so, they shall betray the founding prophecy and unfailing guiding doxa of Anoa's past and future. The narrators'

6 Although T'Chala later loosened the grounds of Wakandan belongingness a little bit—"We must find a way to *look after one another as if we were one single tribe*"—it was not exactly as Killmonger wished.

7 In the African context, chapter 6 of Emmanuel Obiechina, *Language and Theme: Essays on African Literature* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1990) remains the classic reference on that genre. Narratively, Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973) contextualizes the persistence of crisis in the postcolonial nation.

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words render imperative the deployment of a meta-language and a political disposition that puts internally evolved concepts at the center of the definition, classification, and appreciation of national history and ambitions. To them, advocating for deliberately nativized material and intellectual instruments of knowing requires no justification. These are their words:

> The way is not the rule of men. The way is never women ruling men. The way is reciprocity. The way is not barrenness. Nor is the way this heedless fecundity. The way is not blind productivity. The way is creation knowing its purpose, wise in the withholding of itself from snares, from destroyers. (17)
>
> Our way, the way, is not a random path. Our way begins from coherent understanding. It is a way that aims at preserving knowledge of who we are, knowledge of the best way we have found to relate to each, each to all, ourselves to other peoples, all to our surroundings. If our individual lives have a worthwhile aim, that aim should be a purpose inseparable from the way. (39)
>
> Our way is reciprocity. The way is wholeness. Our way knows no oppression. The way destroys oppression. Our way is hospitable to guests. The way repels destroyers. Our way produces before it consumes. The way produces far more than it consumes. Our way creates. The way destroys only destruction. (39)
>
> He is no liberator whose skill lies in calling loudly to the bound, the trapped, the impotent, the enslaved, to rise upon their destroyers. The liberator is he who from a necessary silence, from a necessary secrecy strikes the destroyer. That, not loudness, is the necessary beginning. (204)
>
> We do not utter praise of arms. The praise of arms is the praise of things, and what shall we call the soul crawling so low, soul so hollow it finds fulfillment in the praising of mere things? It is not things we praise in our utterance, not arms we praise but the living relationship itself of those united in the use of all things against the sway of death, for creation's life. That is the beauty of the seer's vision, that alone is music to the hearer's ear. That is the sole utterance of utterers conscious of our way, the way. Whatever thing, whatever relationship, whatever consciousness takes us along paths closer to our way, whatever goes against the white destroyer's empire, that thing only is beautiful. (205)

The similarity of these words to the ones spoken by T'Challa on how to manage Wakanda's vibranium economy needs no further glossing beyond observing that they "intellectualize" T'Challa's keyword style of phrasing. Armah's narrators, like T'Challa, insist on self-understanding and caution against undue self-extension. They both stress the respect for boundaries and painstakingly explain the ethics of self-restraint. Chronologically, Armah's narrators of Anoa operated in the remote past of T'Challa Wakanda's past. The storytellers position themselves as spokespersons of a foreordained history that will eventually witness the restoration of their country's time-tested ways broken by millennia of unwary indifference. The assurance of a single cause in their grand verbal articulations of the way's trajectory exudes comfort, counteracting in effect the uncertainty that haunts daily existence. Indeed, their storytelling rejects realism as unwise: "how have we come to be mere mirrors to annihilation? for whom do we aspire to reflect our people's death? for whose entertainment shall we sing our agony? in what hope? That the destroyers, aspiring to extinguish us, will suffer conciliatory remorse at the sight of their own fantastic success" (xiii).

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Bare reflexivity has never succeeded, they pleaded. Visionary projection, they argue, promises more. In their circumstances, realism is inadequate for addressing the desperate present. "Mirror" reflection, they stress, is part of "the exhilarated chase after death" (xiii). Mirrors do not make, the storytellers argue (xiv). Instead of merely reflecting the state of things, they urge rememberers to see beyond the apparent. They communicate in imperatives. They speak of the eternal existential flows: "receiving, giving, giving, receiving, all that lives is twin. Who would cast the spell of death, let him separate the two" (xii).

It is not hard to argue that in Anoa and Wakanda, empathetic selfhood, personal or collective, is a central principle of "the Way, our Way." The emotional arch of storytelling in both *Two Thousand Seasons* and *Black Panther* tilts toward self-affirmation within a contemplatively produced nationalist telos, a self-consciously wrought totality contraption that a strain in postcolonial discourse represents, and generally dismisses, as nativism without giving adequate consideration to how the grand, visionary narrative that holds the belief together acknowledges and sometimes revises the shifting grounds of its own constitution.[8]

Armah's narrators did not veer from oppositional, near-metaphysical difference in their worldly relations. In this regard, they are not unlike Erik Killmonger Njobu. Their Anoa, like Wakanda, is a small, isolated, community. Unlike Wakanda, but not too dissimilar to Killmonger's Oakland, California, Anoa consists of wearied, self-liberating, survivors of a slave ship rebellion, who are understandably suspicious of outsiders. They, unlike Wakandans, do not have to imagine the possibility of physical annihilation or political conquest by outsiders and collaborators from within their country because their experiences of such loss of self are very recent. Although it could be argued that Nakia and W'Kabi inherited from Armah's storytellers the anxiety about oppositional Others, the newer characters speak confidently about the well-being of their country's "way" and citizens' "self" probably because the tenets have already been naturalized in life routines that Killmonger does not understand.

We may ask, How come harsh realities of historical experience consolidate the necessity of oppositional difference for Armah's narrators and Killmonger but fail to secure victory for them? Why does experience fail Killmonger and not his Wakanda co-nationals? The answer is that T'Challa's era is not the time for culture- and race-based opposition and that the spectacle of succession rituals tells the story of belatedness better than any other aspect of the film.

Ritual, Totality, Play, and National Persistence

How do a people so driven by the many past wars and disasters narrated at the beginning of *Black Panther* manage to recognize itself as such for so long? The film addresses this—speaking hemispherically—critical postcolonial and postslavery question in three prominent succession battles, two of them staged elaborately as "ritual combat." The first, which took place after the assassination of T'Chaka, was declared open by Zuri, compere of inauguration ceremonies, in the following words: "Victory in

8 T'Challa's cautious reaching out at the end of *Black Panther* develops after its feasibility has been tested by others, including his fierce cousin and many of the nation's prominent war chiefs.

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ritual combat comes by yield or death. If any tribe wishes to put forth a warrior. *I now offer a path to the throne.*" The stilted announcement signals a lot more than formulaic procedure. It sublimates interethnic agreements and summarizes in the necessarily brief language of ritual order compromises that were made to settle previous battles of supremacy.

The "thin" depiction of the T'Challa/Mbaku combat scene is one of most impressive in the film. The ritual spot—strategically set in the majestic natural backdrop created by colorful sheets of steep, rocky terrain, massive, roaring waterfalls creating a natural soundtrack—is sublime. The subtext of the ritualized dialogue that accompanies the succession-fight is "thick"[9] with dominant "writing back" tropes of postcolonial critique: we have reason, we have culture, we have order, we are capable of self-management. That the life and death spectacle of combat memorializes the necessity of a compact among powerful ruling factions is apparent in the publicly avowed group affirmations of allegiance and renunciations of claims to the throne. The public declarations condense the acceptance of prevailing settlements of regional, artisanal, professional, trade, and ecological differences in Wakanda. Hence, the subsequent choreographed antagonism follows a plot in which only certain actors can play prescribed roles. The rules of the pageant allow for a negotiated resolution to the potential disruptions that a truly ambitious faction that has misjudged its abilities might cause. In the drama, therefore, only the defeated who holds on tightly to a singularity conception of victory dies and misses the chance to concede and continue as a part of the nation. Whether the defeated lives or dies, Wakanda continues.[10]

In the cultural celebration of the installation of a new king, Wakandans demonstrate the reason of their ways: those who consent to the prevailing order shall be granted a full life and will not be subjugated, and the powerless shall be granted the opportunity to continue under the protection of the powerful. To manage the consensus, institutions of playful orderliness (Shuri mocking her brother) and orderly playfulness (e.g., the conventional call to challenge for the throne) are implemented. The ritual order dramatizes the give-and-take of social equilibrium. It's pure hegemony in practice. The challenge thrown by Mbaku on behalf of the mountain community further affirms how the otherwise real threat of political disequilibrium is displaced into, and managed with, the ritual pageant that is affectively satisfying to all factions. Although the mountain people exist outside of conventions that govern life in the Wakandan metropolis, they are a party to the prevailing governance compact for the whole nation. Their leader's succession skirmish with T'Challa reenacts the bloody, realpolitik calculations that the grandeur of inauguration inscribes as culture. Here, ritual combat is not mock combat because real blood might be shed. Mbaku's challenge restarts the battle for the consent of the governed, one that will be won either by killing the adversary or by gaining his or her allegiance through other means. The wise sovereign will, even in

9 "Thin" ("uninterpreted data") and "thick" (cogent explications of data) depictions are adapted from Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), especially 16–17.

10 The sense of ritual deployed here derives from Soyinka's theoretical interpretations in "Who's Afraid of Elesin Oba?" (chapter 7 of Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988). According to Soyinka, "Ritual is the irreducible formal agent for event-disparate and time-separated actions of human beings in human society."

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physical victory, be magnanimous and grant life without enslaving the body. That implied justification of the ritual allows T'Challa to tell Mbaku that "You have fought with honor! Now yield! Your people need you." That reason also enables the defeated to reciprocate in order that the kingdom could continue in the image of peace it has created for itself. Mbaku knows before joining the life and death fight that the opportunity to live is available to him.

The obverse events that occurred in the second succession fight, the one between Killmonger and T'Challa, further validate the "thick" principles of the spectacle. Killmonger challenged for the throne in the palace cabinet room, showing no respect for the spirit of the law. When the rivals finally met at the waterfall, T'Challa, seeking to circumvent ritual order, says, "Throw down your weapons, and we can handle this another way." Killmonger devalues the transactional instrumentality of ritual play when he says, "I lived my entire life waiting for this moment. I trained, I lied, I killed just to get here. I killed in America, Afghanistan, Iraq. I took life from my own brothers and sisters right here on this continent. And all this death just so I could kill you."

Killmonger's hubristic discounting of reciprocity proved fatal. Even when he is among kin, difference, for Killmonger, remains oppositional; it's all order (ritual) and no play (the sublimation of intent). He kills Zuri even after the old man has yielded. He humiliates T'Challa before throwing him into the abyss without giving him the chance to yield. By hurtling his opponent into the waterfall without offering him the opportunity to concede, Killmonger inadvertently leaves the ritual inconclusive and opens his rule to future challenges. Mistaking the proverbial mask for the spirit, "thin" presentation for "thick" meaning, Killmonger acts as if those who are defeated in power struggles do not deserve a free life. Killmonger is here shown to be ignorant of Wakanda's *way*, not because he is not born in Wakanda—his claim to the throne is legitimate—but because he is not properly educated about it. Wakandans order their relationships to the world on the basis of what their history has taught them. Killmonger, acting solely on the basis of bloodline, considers himself qualified to discredit those lessons of experience.

The most devastating dimension of the film's criticism of oppositional difference in *Black Panther* is acted out fully in the third and final fight for the throne when T'Challa, having inflicted a mortal injury on his cousin, although away from the prescribed ritual spot, extends the opportunity for life to his rival.

> T'Challa: Maybe we can still heal you.
> Killmonger: Why? So you can just lock me up? Nah. Just bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships. 'Cause they knew death was better than bondage.

T'Challa's empathetic, life-prolonging offer was rebuffed. Killmonger rejects his cousin's anti-Hegelian way because he cannot envision a bloody conflict that will result in anything other than the permanent subjection of the defeated. Although he is right in surmising that "death is better than bondage"—a near literal translation of "ikú yá jẹ̀sin" in the Yorùbá language—he is wrong in believing that T'Challa's offer spells bondage. Mbaku could have instructed him otherwise.

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Homing the Individual

In the opening voice-over sequence, Njobu recounts Wakanda's official history of its emergence and sustenance in response to his son's request for "the story of home." When young Erik was told that "the Wakandans vowed to hide in plain sight, keeping the truth of their power from the outside world," he asked a critical question: "Do we still hide Baba?" At the end of *Black Panther*, partly as a result of Erik Killmonger's machinations, Wakanda's might appears in plain view to him and to his audience. The technocrats—of rituals, of warfare weapons, of governance, of diplomacy—have won. Viewers in the know cannot but realize that constructing the future prophesied in the fierce anticolonial criticism waged in the representations of *Two Thousand Seasons* has reached an advanced stage. Balance has been restored at home. Forces of rupture and division have been defeated. Home has gained its rightful significance as the place of power. It has become the place for citizens to enjoy the right to fully exercise acquired and inherited abilities to make others follow one's wishes so that one can reshape the world in accordance with one's independently cultivated vision. At home, the individual lives unafraid and invulnerable to subjection. The tendency toward achieving the dream of postcolonial liberation appears irreversible.

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