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Fifty Shades of Blackness: Recovering an Aesthetics of the Afrifuge

Dilip Menon

Black lives and histories are to the fore at the moment: from #BlackLivesMatter in the United States to the movement to decolonize syllabi and pedagogy in South African universities. The film Black Panther *is watched within a visual and political terrain in which the black body is presented no longer only within histories of previous abjection—slavery and apartheid—but in visions of future reconstitution. This article will put together the changing representation of T'Challa from 1966 to the present in Marvel Comics and the film and argue that blackness has meant different things at different times to the creators as much as within the historical circumstance within which the black superhero has been seen and understood. Central to this has been the dilemma of bringing together the histories of "Africa" and the tenements of the United States—Wakanda and Oakland, California, in the film, and Harlem, New York, in the comic books.*

Keywords: race, comics, Black Panther, Africa, cinema

Black lives and histories are to the fore at the moment: from #BlackLivesMatter in the United States to the movement to decolonize syllabi and pedagogy in South African universities. The film *Black Panther* is watched within a visual and political terrain in which the black body is presented no longer only within histories of previous abjection—slavery and apartheid—but in visions of future reconstitution. For many viewers of Hollywood cinema, the presence on-screen of a black superhero ruling over a black kingdom, technologically far in advance of any contemporary nation, east or west, was both fantasy and a fulfilment of a desire to see something other than an endless succession of white saviors of the world. Whether catering to wish fulfilment, or a politically savvy alignment with the times, the film spoke to audiences universally, while making it the top-grossing superhero film of all time in North America in March 2018. Viewers of Bollywood and Nollywood may have been bemused by the celebration of a black hero because the paradigm of Hindi and Nigerian cinema had always had local heroes of native origin with white characters presented as mere status props or villains to be routinely thrashed. The question that we need to address, though seemingly cussed, is whether the Black Panther is black in any meaningful sense, and if so, how and why. This

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article will put together the changing representation of T'Challa from 1966 to the present in Marvel Comics and the film and argue that blackness has meant different things at different times to the creators as much as within the historical circumstance within which the black superhero has been seen and understood. Central to this has been the dilemma of bringing together the histories of "Africa" and the tenements of the United States—Wakanda and Oakland, California, in the film, and Harlem, New York, in the comic books.

Kendrick Lamar's soundtrack for the film, particularly in his songs, centrally addresses the question of race in the United States at the present historical juncture. T'Challa, the king of Wakanda, is at the same time "King of my city, king of my country, king of my homeland/ King of the filthy, king of the fallen, we livin' again/ King of the shooters, looters, boosters and ghetto poppin'/ King of the past, present, future, my ancestors watchin. … ' " He is a messianic figure of the fallen and forsaken, drawing upon past visions (of black power as much as Marcus Garvey) while at the same time someone who is located in a history of grief and loss: "king of remorse." At the same time, there is a deep skepticism, tinged with the hope of an otherwise, toward the very possibility of a kingdom of redemption. Is one man up to it, and that too a king? "Are you a king or you jokin'? Are you a king or you posin'?"[1] This ambivalence of looking to a black messiah—a king—from the middle of a modern nation mired in race and the debris past of visions of equality is brought up again with poignancy and pathos in *Pray for Me* (Kendrick Lamar and Weeknd). "Tell me who's gon' save me from myself/ When this life is all I know." What is the valence of a black superhero in the middle of an ongoing war, where there is just the recurrence and persistence of death—lives unchanging. There is only the existential and lonely fight of being black: "I fight the world, I fight you, I fight myself/ I fight God. … " There is no space for a superhero: "You need a hero, look in the mirror, there go your hero/ Who on the front lines at ground zero?"[2]

Ta-Nehisi Coates in his blog for *The Atlantic*, while conceptualizing the script of the film as much as the ongoing comic book series, expressed again a similar ambivalence about the Black Panther as a black superhero. "T'Challa," he wrote, "has always struck [me] as the product of the black nationalist dream, a walking revocation of white supremacist myth."[3] He put it precisely, "T'Challa is black. This is not a declaration. It's an opportunity." Is the Black Panther black, or is it a metaphor for the latent powers in all humanity that calls out and speaks for the oppressed and the downtrodden? "When I first started writing, I was anxious that I would be pigeon-holed into the "race-beat." Eventually, I realized that the "race-beat" was actually the "humanity-beat" and that questions about "racism" are really questions about the exercise of power … questions about race were questions about the very nature of the Western world."[4] This posing of race as an epistemological issue about a redeemed humanity can be contrasted to Lamar's visceral experiential idea of blackness—violence, pain, and sorrow. To return

1 Kendrick Lamar, *Black Panther*, lyrics as https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-black-panther-lyrics.
2 The Weeknd, Kendrick Lamar, *Pray for Me*, lyrics at https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/34793538/The+Weeknd/Pray+for+Me.
3 Ta-Hehisi Coates, "Conceptualizing the Black Panther," *The Atlantic*, December 2, 2015. Accessed August 22, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2015/12/conceptualizing-the-black-panther/418479/.
4 Ta-Hehisi Coates, "Conceptualizing the Black Panther."

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to the question of how black, what that blackness entails and what histories it draws upon, the blackness of the Black Panther has always been a problem for his creators. Christopher Priest, the first black artist to draw and write the Black Panther comics, wrote in 1999, "Nobody sat me down and told me to make Black Panther about race. And it's not. It's about family, and loyalty, and being true to oneself. It is about devotion to country and duty, being honorable when everyone around you is not."[5] In Priest's hands, the Panther is not *black*, but someone who embodies more generally the values of a Boy Scout—honor, duty—of whom Baden-Powell himself would have been proud. We cannot assume the blackness of the Black Panther; this is a question to be wrestled with and a historical account of the vicissitudes of his representation is necessary.

The "Salience" of Race and the "Blackness" of the Black Panther

What is the valence of the "black" in the Black Panther with all the changing meanings of blackness over the two generations that the comics have been in existence? What makes us think that T'Challa is black in anything other than a merely empirical and phenotypical sense: the dark-skinned king of an African kingdom of uncertain location? This article will argue that there has been from the very beginning a deep ambivalence toward the blackness as much as the African-ness of the Black Panther in the American, and particularly the African American, imagination: the pull of Africa as the site of origin tugging against Africa as the world left behind. Mark Jerng's idea of racial worldmaking is productive here by which he refers to how readers are prepared to "embed race into [our] expectations for how the world operates."[6] The question we have to ask literally is whether to trust our eyes alone and the "visual epistemology of race."[7] The Black Panther comes to us within a franchised pantheon of superheroes in which we are made to notice race; through provenance (Wakanda), skin color (black), and ethnicity (African). In most senses, however, neither the character of T'Challa nor the narrative performs race. We recognize T'Challa as black because of how we are made to "notice" race and therefore "see" it. As Jerng points out, we should be aware of how race is made "salient" (as in brought to notice, pointed out, mentioned, and so on).[8] The blackness of the Black Panther is what we are made to notice and is made salient through narration, but it is precisely this blackness that is most in doubt as we shall see.

It is important to remember that the Black Panther has been with us since Don McGregor first drew him in *Marvel Comics* no. 52 in July 1966. A series of coincidences, "synchronicities" in Adilifu Nama's words, attended the birth of the hero.[9] In 1966, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization used the image of a black panther against the Alabama Democratic Party's white rooster. Later in the year, in October 1966, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in Oakland, California, by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. The decade also saw a wave of decolonization in Africa; thirty-one

5 Christopher Priest, "*Marvel Comics*, #12, 1999," in *Black Panther: The Complete Collection*, vol.1 (Washington, DC Marvel Comics, 2015), Kindle edition.

6 Mark C. Jerng, *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 40, (Kindle Edition).

7 Jerng, *Racial Worldmaking*, 44.

8 Jerng, *Racial Worldmaking*, 170.

9 Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 42.

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countries attained independence between January 1960 and October 1966, and the names of Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Patrice Lumumba, Julius Nyerere, and Jomo Kenyatta among others signified the emergence of a new African continent. The civil rights movement in the United States had entered its final phase, and alongside a growing resistance to indiscriminate bombing in Vietnam, registering black voters, and attempts at desegregation in Chicago, ideas of "black power" had begun to contend with Martin Luther King's peaceful paradigm. There was also a degree of hope introduced by the participation of white youth in campaigns against race segregation that led even Eldridge Cleaver to write in 1968, "There is in America today a generation of white youth that is truly worthy of a black man's respect. … "[10] Jack Kerouac's prose of a decade earlier, redolent with romanticism, "At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro," seemed far away but still hung in the air.[11] When McGregor sat down to create his character and people the world of Wakanda, it was less the ideology of the Black Panther Party and more the ameliorative idea of race that was to guide his pen.

In *Fantastic Four* #52, we are first introduced to the figure of the Black Panther through conversations among the Four who are flying a spacecraft sent to them by T'Challa, the king of Wakanda. The Thing remarks acidly, "How does some refugee from a Tarzan movie lay his hands on this kinda gizmo?"[12] Our first encounter with the Black Panther is in the regalia of a chief, surrounded by people and guards carrying spears as much as more advanced weaponry. A huge statue of the panther god dominates the view at the base of which, "the powerfully built monarch exposes a bank of electronic computers."[13] The Fantastic Four enter into what is to turn out to be a one-sided conflict with the Black Panther, and in McGregor's overheated prose, "are separated from their astounding antagonist by a vast, mind-staggering complex of unfathomable electronic marvels."[14] We are introduced to vibranium, the element that absorbs all vibration, the source of Wakanda's wealth and T'Challa's power, while also being told in a footnote that the Black Panther is "considered a sacred being as the cow is venerated in India." Burroughs observes wryly that the introduction of this character was a way of "racially desegregating Marvel's House of Ideas."[15] Wakanda is an unstable amalgam of present African-ness and a hyper-scientific futurity, and it is interesting that after this science-beyond-science introduction, for the rest of the series, we see T'Challa as a king and a man. He moves from being a combination of Superman and James Bond to a Hamlet-like figure very rapidly—unsure of himself, his powers, and extremely vulnerable. We begin to ask, Is the Black Panther a black superhero or a black leader who mirrors the uncertainties of the trajectory of independence on the African continent? In McGregor's hands, the superhero has no superpowers except a dogged commitment to Wakanda and its preservation. He faces a succession of encounters with Killmonger

10 Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), 72.
11 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 161–02.
12 Don McGregor, *Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage*, vol.1 (Washington DC: Marvel Comics, 2016).
13 McGregor, "Issue #52," *Black Panther Epic Collection.* July.
14 McGregor, *Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage.*
15 Todd Steven Burroughs, *Marvel's Black Panther: A Comic Book Biography from Stan Lee to Ta-Nehisi Coates* (New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2018), 184, Kindle edition.

and his creatures—Venomm, Baron Macabre. King Cadaver, Lord Karnaj, Salamander K'ruel—as also the rhinos, gorillas, and dinosaurs that populate the far reaches of the kingdom.

In each of the encounters, the Black Panther is bruised, battered, and his costume is torn to shreds. He is a figure of suffering, Christ-like, taking on pain for the redemption of his people. Each painful encounter is graphically described: "jagged shards of stone slice into his body … scalding flame sears his flesh";[16] "pain births insanity within his mind and desperation is the mid-wife."[17] He rises from each encounter without a feeling of vengeance or anger but rather overwhelmingly convinced of his duty to guard and to suffer. It is not clear while reading these early comics whether we are to see T'Challa as a new superhero within the Marvel franchise or a metaphor for blackness. The comics constantly summon up the black body in pain—the experience of the Middle Passage and the cruelties of the plantation—and cast each encounter within a redemptive narrative. The Black Panther is configured through images associated with being black in the liberal imagination—a noble relation to pain that dignifies and exalts. It is significant that T'Challa does not kill his opponents. He knows that "death is not merely poetic slow motion and spurting catchup [*sic*]. Death is intimate … and diminishes its perpetrators."[18] We can read this commitment to nonviolence or, indeed, the commitment to personal suffering through the paradigm of Martin Luther King's nonviolence and the courage to take on violence on oneself in order to delegitimize it. It could also be seen as a trope in the history of being black in America, from the suffering Uncle Tom figure to the civil rights protestors. At the same time, it marks a move away from the contemporary rhetoric of the Black Panther Party and its commitment to armed violence.

One must, however, also remember the historical circumstance of the emerging African nations and a leadership that faced an unremitting violence from the political order of the Cold War—from coups to political assassinations, such as that of Patrice Lumumba and Thomas Sankara. Nama argues acutely that the Black Panther "performs exemplary symbolic work as a recuperative figure and majestic signifier of the best of the black anti-colonialist movement."[19] Scattered through the comics are T'Challa's reflections on power and violence and his abhorrence of killing. He kills none of the villains in the series; all of them live to fight another day. Killmonger himself is killed, thrown over a cliff, not by the Black Panther, but a child extracting revenge for his father's murder. In the segment on Lord Karnaj, T'Challa muses, "Oftimes [*sic*] once you slay the dragon … its blood stains more than your hands."[20] Killing introduces an irresoluble existential dilemma. Again, in the installment titled *Killmonger*, T'Challa philosophizes on the conundrum of being a ruler: "How does a leader teach his people such a thing as respect for life ? … and how does he keep his principle firm unto himself when callous atrocities transpire all around him?"[21] Moreover, to be a leader was to bear the burden of self-

16 McGregor, *Black Panther Epic Collection.* May 1974.
17 McGregor, *Black Panther Epic Collection.* July 10, 1974.
18 McGregor, *Black Panther Epic Collection.* March 14, 1974.
19 Nama, *Super Black*, 43.
20 McGregor, *Black Panther Epic Collection.* September 11, 1974.
21 McGregor, *Black Panther Epic Collection.* November 1974.

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doubt to question the anointing of oneself over others. And this is where, I believe, Ta Nehisi-Coates gets it wrong when he writes, "Wakanda is a contradiction. It is the most advanced nation on Earth, existing under one of the most primitive forms of governance on Earth."[22] Considering that England and Denmark have hereditary monarchies and a line of succession that runs only through the "royal" family, Wakanda's annual ritual of the test of strength in which anyone can lay claim to the throne through defeating the reigning Black Panther seems to be a somewhat more democratic mode, even if in a WWF format. T'Challa in one of his moods of introspection asks, "Self-doubt. When did such indecision become a decisive feature in his life? When he became a ruler and had to make decisions?"[23]

McGregor seeks to move beyond the postcolonial dilemmas of rule and leadership in Africa by moving the Black Panther plot to the United States and connecting two histories of blackness. We have already been prepared for this through T'Challa's lover being an African American singer of the blues, Monica Lynne, who tries hard to adjust both to the atmosphere of the Wakandan court and the hostility she faces as an outsider. In *The Sacrifice of Blood*, launched on January 1976, T'Challa goes to the United States to investigate the murder of Monica's sister, ostensibly by the KKK, for exposing a realty fraud. Here again, he is bruised and battered in the course of engaging the Klan, and one of the striking instalments titled *Slaughter in the Streets* has T'Challa put on a burning cross by the KKK, which he escapes but just short of dying himself. One of the characters, Leroy Ames, says at one point, "Maybe you've never heard'a the kids who were wiped out by Klan members during a civil rights demonstration back in the 1960s," where Klan members were acquitted.[24] Although the political stance is overt, T'Challa still remains a Hamlet-like figure marked by indecision and a commitment to nonviolence. The question to be asked here could be about the constraints of political thinking in a popular genre. Marvel Comics would not advocate race-war and, certainly, the Black Panther Party was the bogey that haunted both the conservative and liberal imagination in America. However, McGregor manages to think through a liberal resolution of racial conflict by portraying the ambivalence toward violence at the heart of the liberal imagination. The Black Panther, whether in Wakanda or the deep South—the terrain of Norman Jewison's *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) as much as the lynching of Emmett Till—becomes an embodiment of reflection on ascriptive hierarchies and the responsibility of power. He is the anguished witness, devoid of any superpower of resolution, who through his bodily pain and doubt defers a solution, at least till the next installment. Vibranium is merely a backdrop, the possession of which allows him entry into the league of superheroes. It is a *pharmakon*, both cure and poison, because it is the possession of vibranium that starts off the vicious cycle of violence with Killmonger.

In 1998, Christopher Priest became the first African American to write the series. As we have seen earlier, Priest was profoundly ambivalent about the blackness of the character that he had to work with. In fact, it was not only the color of his superhero that bothered him, but the fact that the character that McGregor had delineated was so

22 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Conceptualizing the Black Panther," *The Atlantic*, December 2, 2015. Accessed August 22, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2015/12/conceptualizing-the-black-panther/418479/.
23 McGregor, *Black Panther Epic Collection.* May 15, 1974.
24 McGregor, "*Sacrifice of Blood*," *Black Panther Epic Collection.* November 24, 1976.

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unendearing given his extremely ascetic temperament. "It seemed to me, as a reader, the writers simply didn't know what to do with this man who had no superpowers, no snappy dialogue, no berserker rage, and no obvious character flaw to capitalize on."[25] Priest's resolution of the problem was to make T'Challa cool: a rich, powerful, and handsome dude neither irresolute nor driven by angst. In the desire to present the Black Panther as a superhero who just happens to be black, there were several plot changes. T'Challa was given a permanent State Department attaché, Everett K. Ross, a young white man who became the narrator of the plotline, and we know the Panther as The Client. Interspersed with the action, we have Everett reporting on events in retrospect to his boss Nikki at the CIA. (Nikki, in a further twist, had been dating T'Challa!). Priest introduces us to the Dora Milaje (based on the late-nineteenth-century women warriors of Dahomey/Benin, more on them later) as wives-in-waiting ("potential wives") to whom the Black Panther speaks for reasons unknown in Hausa, raising the question of where exactly Wakanda is located.[26] The references to African American identity are ironic; we are told that "T'Challa is also the Avenger called Eldredge [*sic*] Cleaver," referencing the early leader of the Black Panther Party.[27] The chief villain, who engineers a coup in Wakanda, triggers off ethnic wars and takes over, is the Rev. Dr. Michael Ibn Al-Hajj Achebe, PhD in law from Yale with multiple degrees in psychology, political science, and divinity. He is described as "a nutty evil Bishop Tutu," but the reference to "Achebe" after the venerated Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, and the surfeit of degrees indexing Robert Mugabe, suggests a hodge-podge of an African identity, none of which are particularly savory.[28] To be fair, the descriptions all around tend to be offensive to everyone. Everett is described as the "Emperor of Useless White Boys" ("The Client"), and The Avengers are dismissed peremptorily: "They called themselves The Avengers, which I had always assumed was Greek for 'Gaudily Dressed Borderline Fascists' " ("Heart and Soul").

Nama argues that Priest's "irreverence and self-reflexivity" generated the space for the Black Panther to become a central figure in the Marvel series. Significantly, the rationale he offers is that the tone of the series "outmaneuvered the demand for a superhero to be "black."[29] which is a curious argument to say the least! A black superhero who is not black is a major act of prestidigitation. We have traveled a long distance from McGregor's T'Challa, an amalgam of African dilemmas and leadership that avoided clichés to the political and cultural assimilationism of Priest and Hudlin, who followed. In 2004, Reginald Hudlin, Hollywood writer and director and the president of Black Entertainment Television, took over at a time when American popular culture was almost synonymous with black culture. Burroughs argues that Hudlin completed the process of creating a "racially and culturally decolonized Panther" that appealed to the African American imagination.[30] The shades of a besieged African nation were preserved in the first Hudlin story in which the Black Panther and his techie sister Shuri

25 Quoted in Burroughs, *Marvel's Black Panther*, 1086.
26 Priest, *Black Panther.*
27 Priest, "The Client," *Black Panther.* November 1, 1998.
28 Priest, "Heart and Soul," *Black Panther.* January 3, 1999.
29 Nama, *Super Black*, 51.
30 Burroughs, *Marvel's Black Panther*, 1687.

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(now a team) stop an invasion of Wakanda by the Rhino (representing America), Batroc (France), Radioactive Man (Russia), and Black Knight (England). The Dora Milaje no longer look like models who have stepped off the catwalk and are soldiers like the Dahomey Amazons that they were based upon. If Priest had made T'Challa cool, Hudlin made of him a very American figure, "navigating the byways and backstreets of black urban America like a cultural flaneur."[31] In fact, the *über* coolness of the Black Panther is shown in *BadMutha* (2006), in which T'Challa hangs out in a late-night dance club! This echoes the scene in the film, where he seems very much at home in a Korean casino much as James Bond would, ready for battle as much as baccarat.

There is, however, a greater ambiguity in Hudlin regarding the African connection and its relation to American blackness. Priest was clear about the idea of race, of its local provenance and histories, and of himself as a nonhyphenated black man. "Race is funny. Black people are hilarious. Look at Don King's hair. Lionel Richie's career."[32] In Hudlin's Black Panther, *Civil War* (2007), the Black Panther and Storm (his wife) travel to Latveria to confront Dr. Victor von Doom, and the following conversation ensues.

> Doom: I've always said that the African is a superior physical specimen
> Storm: Finish the sentence, Doom, "which compensates for his lack of intellect."
> Doom: Generally true. Yes, but clearly the Wakandan is exceptional! Perhaps a low-grade mutant strain in your people's DNA.
> Black Panther: Or perhaps because we had the military might to maintain our own cultural integrity and our technological superiority over Europeans such as yourself. When you were in caves, we were charting stars.[33]

There is an echo of Afro-centrism here and of the non-European origins of civilization, but such moments are few in a story-scape that makes of Africa a metaphor. If the visualizations of the Black Panther have moved in an arc from African king to cool superhero character whose complexion is just different from that of his empowered cohort (just as the Hulk *happens* to be green), Wakanda itself has shifted tectonically. Don McGregor located Wakanda somewhere in central Africa, which was consistent with the presence of the "domain of the white gorillas" across the Chasm of Chilling Mist. The map is an autarkic one with little sense of place or coordinates. It is not clear what language the inhabitants speak, the understanding being that we hear them already mediated through English. Priest has T'Challa speak to the Dora Milaje in Hausa, which is consistent with Nigeria and Benin being neighbors, though if one were being pedantic, it is Yoruba and Fon that are more common in Benin. Of course, being wives-in-waiting, they would have had to learn the language of their liege. Hudlin locates Wakanda in an indefinite space because Zulu is spoken as much as Hausa, and, of course, Nelson Mandela does call T'Challa on his crowning. Ulysses Klaw, the arch villain, is a descendant of Boers, but now settled in Belgium, connecting him to histories of both apartheid and genocide! For Hudlin, the Roman Catholic Church and the Nigandan (Uganda) government for their different reasons are interested in Wakanda's downfall.

31 Nama, *Super Black*, 51.
32 Priest, "Enemy of the State #12," *Black Panther.*
33 Reginald Hudlin, "Civil War," in *Black Panther: The Complete Collection*, vol. 1 (Washington DC: Marvel Comics, 2019), Kindle edition.

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The ability of the Nigandan/Ugandan government to intervene politically suggests a proximity or shared borders, which shifts the terrain once again. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his blog, locates Wakanda on the eastern banks of Lake Victoria with Mohannda to the north, Canaan to the east, and Azania and Niganda to the south.[34] Geographically, it puts Wakanda with Congo and Rwanda to the east, Uganda to the north, and Kenya and Tanzania to the West. We are closer to the original location of Wakanda though farther east in Africa, where Swahili is spoken. Although one can understand the predilection toward Hausa and Nigeria by Priest and Hudlin, given the connections of West Africa with the slave trade, the fact that Swahili makes no appearance and Zulu and Xhosa do is somewhat puzzling.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his writing of the story *A Nation Under Our Feet*, carries the uneasiness toward Africa further in his rendition of a broken king over a broken Wakanda. T'Challa has transitioned from Damisa Sarki (Wakandan for Black Panther) to Haramu-Fal (the Orphan King), the title indexing Swahili and the idea of illegitimate, illicit, and forbidden. The very idea of a monarchy is not only antiquated but linked to despotism and an opposition to the kind of democracy such that no doubt America represents. In *A Nation Under Our Feet* (book 2, no. 5) Symkaria explains to T'Challa that Wakanda's problem is schizophrenia; that they think of themselves as "men of honour," while they actually may be only "repressive thugs." Karl von Baer, the Alberian representative puts it succinctly, "In fact there is only one great tradition in Wakanda and it is the same tradition among us all—the tradition of holding a nation under our feet."[35]

We are reminded uneasily of American imperial discourse about the lack of democracy in other parts of the world; Wakanda appears ripe for an act of "humanitarian violence."[36] The Wakandan university professor Changamire has taught democratic ideas to the people, and with the destruction by Thanos (a cleansing destruction?) of Wakanda, it is no longer unconquerable. If the construction of Wakanda reflected the imagination of a resurgent Africa in the 1960s in the American imagination, Ta-Nehisi Coates completes the deconstruction of Africa in an American imperial age, leaving it with no intellectual justification. Wakanda is left with its high-tech gizmos and a king, but the age of monarchs is over; an unarmorial age has begun. Hudlin began this disillusioning of Wakanda. He proposed that Wakanda escaped colonization because of a pact: if the west did not make war on Wakanda, it would turn a blind eye to the slave trade and European colonialism in the rest of Africa. Hudlin imagines this Faustian bargain in order to excise the nobility of an imagined homeland. There is no home to return to, only a morally flawed continent. With Ta-Nehisi Coates, the disillusionment is complete.

The question remains, What is the Africa that is invoked in the franchise? Here is where we must turn to the longue durée of the American imagination. Three conjunctures are crucial for the way in which the Black Panther, in particular, draws upon popular memory and American history. The first conjuncture is the emergence of the

34 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Conceptualizing the Black Panther."

35 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet*, vol. 1, book 2, no. 5 (Washington DC: Marvel Comics, 2016).

36 Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London: Verso, 2012).

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United States as an imperial power in the late nineteenth century with the war against Spain and the slow acquisition of the Philippines. Although late on the imperial scene, America made haste particularly with regard to opening up China and developed a sense of place in the world, aided by exhortations to pick up the "white mans' burthen" by the poet of empire. The second conjuncture was the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), which put South African resistance to empire on the map, accompanied by a resurgence of anti–British Empire sentiment in the United States. Farther north, the French conquest of Dahomey from 1890 to 1894 provided a landscape of imperial adventure of which the United States could be a part. Finally, the last decades of the nineteenth century also saw the self-assertion of the United States as a power with the staging of international expositions beginning with the World Columbian Exposition of 1893 highlighting Americas advance.[37] Even as America opened up to the world, it was the immediate proximity of African history that manifested itself within the *imaginaire* of the world fairs. The presence of Africans in the American imagination outside of the history of slaves came from South Africa and Dahomey. The female warriors of Dahomey (described also as the palace guard and as the kings' "third-class wives") fought fiercely against superior French power gaining epithets such as the Amazons of Dahomey.[38] In South Africa, the defeat by Cetshwayo's regiments of British troops at the battle of Isandlwana in 1879 was featured in the American press, with the Zulus gaining a huge reputation as fierce and unyielding warriors.

William Hunt, a Canadian showman who called himself the Great Farini, was the first to bring Zulus over to the United States in association with P.T. Barnum. The Zulus performed in Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth at Madison Square Garden in the 1880s.[39] In 1893, the World Columbian Exposition opened commemorating the four-hundredth year of Columbus's voyage to the Americas. The exhibition included sixty-seven Africans, mostly from Benin (formerly Dahomey) and a few Zulus who accompanied an exhibit by De Beers on a diamond mine).[40] Once the idea of the Zulu warrior entered the American imagination, African Americans, too, got into the act, playing Zulus in reenactments of battles from Isandlwana (a Zulu victory) to the defeat of the Zulu forces at Rorke's Drift by British troops. Vinson and Edgar speak of the travels of more educated Zulu converts to America and gaining education there, including John Nembula, the first Western-trained Zulu doctor; John Langalibalele Dube, who attended Oberlin College and met Booker T. Washington in 1897; and Isaac (Pixley) Seme, his cousin, who would found the South African Native National Congress.[41] These examples were, however, largely unknown in the wider popular sphere, and the stories of Zulu warriors lingered long after Zulus ceased to be part of the international expositions. The South African novelist Zakes Mda, in his recent novel, *The Zulus of New York* (2019),

37 Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberley D Pelle, *Fair America: World's fairs in the United States* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2000).

38 Stanley B. Alpern, *Amazons of Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomey* (New York; New York University Press, 2011).

39 Robert Edgar and Robert T. Vinson, "Zulus Abroad: Cultural Representations and Educational Experiences of Zulus in America," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33.1 (2007).

40 Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

41 Edgar and Vinson, "Zulus Abroad," 57.

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draws upon this history and the Zulu craze in the United States in the early twentieth century.

> Thanks to Cetshwayo, Zulus were so fashionable that there were secret performers all over New York who posed for Zulu. Indeed, some copycat impresarios had added Zulus to their repertoires, most of whom were Americans. The whole of New York and its environs was overrun by Zulus who were screaming like wild men, dancing crazy dances and threatening spectators with badly made assegais and painted timber sticks.[42]

The Zulus and the female warriors of Dahomey survived for an inordinately long time it seems, in the American popular imagination of Africa. In the Black Panther, the Zulus come back: with vibranium. The strange concatenation of South Africa, Dahomey, and Nigeria in a delirious geography where Africa is seen as one country makes the Black Panther comics a repository of the American imagination of Africa in which Ryan Coogler and Ta-Nehisi Coates participate as well. This is evident, too, in Ludwig Goransson's superb soundtrack for the film, which draws upon West African music—the talking drum, the Fula flute, and the inimitable Baba Maal from Senegal—for a scenario in which the characters speak Xhosa and Zulu. As Binyawanga Wainana wrote, "If you must include an African, make sure you get one in Masai, or Zulu or Dogon dress."[43] And his ironic instruction is followed to the hilt in the history of the Black Panther from 1966 through to the film in 2019: "In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country."

Afrifuge Thinking

Thus, the Black Panther is only black inasmuch as he can be perceived as such within a context of racial thinking and practice in America; the "salience of race" as Jerng puts it. Moreover, as we have seen, both Christopher Priest and Ta Nehisi Coates express ambivalence, even disavowal, of race being central to the delineation of the Black Panther as a superhero. He is a superhero who happens to be black, no less no more. Looked at in the context of larger historical and thematic arguments about race and its relation to African-ness, the question here would be how the world of the Black Panther relates to ideas such as Afro-futurism, Afro-centrism, Pan-Africanism, and the more recent enunciation of Afro-politanism. Central to all of these conceptions is Wakanda's possession of vibranium—the super element that absorbs all vibration—that elevates the land and its central protagonists to the level of, even beyond, an advanced capitalist country. Vibranium allows for a level of material and scientific advancement that is far beyond the imagination of the West allowing for the projection of an Afro-futurist utopia. This is a *proleptic* gesture, imagining a future that exists now. Material advancement also permits the imagining of a role for Africa as an advocate of values of humanitarianism and a larger purpose to a world in conflict. It is less about a presumed hyper-authenticity or a nativism premised on race or ethnicity, and more about a sense of special *purpose.* Africa is elevated as a prophet of the values that the West has lost in its

42 Zakes Mda, *The Zulus of New York* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2019), 87.
43 Binyawanga Wainana, 2005. "How to Write about Africa," *Granta*, 92. Accessed September 24, 2019. https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/.

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pursuit of power and wealth. And finally, the possession of vibranium makes possible the *performance* of cosmopolitanism, where the Panther is *au fait* with the sartorial as much as the intellectual inheritance of the West, but can still retain an African-ness. He can be both the über-cool African in the tenements of Oakland, California, as much as the UN General Assembly. At the same time, in his kingdom, he performs the gestures of a monarchy open to merit and to the challenges of pretenders.

Mark Dery, when he first spoke of Afro-futurism, raised the poignancy of the situation of the African American. An imagination that "appropriated images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" could well be called Afro-futurism. The question that remained, however, was how a community whose "past has been deliberately rubbed out" and whose mission has been the search for "legible traces of its history" could conceivably imagine possible futures.[44] If the Black Panther is an attempt to imagine a future through technology by resolving a historical loss with a technological fix, there still remains the facts of the bare life of blackness in America indexed in incarceration, state violence, and police brutality. Alondra Nelson put it best that "racial identity, and blackness in particular, is the anti-avatar of digital life."[45] It is this dilemma that haunts the imagining of the Black Panther, who even when in Wakanda is preoccupied by the persistence of assault and the need to reiterate a constantly receding wholeness. What we get in McGregor's vision is vibranium as a *pharmakon* that commits the Panther to a never-ending struggle with the likes of Klaw and Killmonger, who will not rest till the element is theirs. Given the fact of black life, vibranium remains a shadowy presence in all the texts, an indication of techno-futurity, but without guarantees. It is not surprising that the initial skepticism expressed by The Thing, about the possibility of a spacecraft from the land of Tarzan, plagues the entire series, and Ta-Nehisi Coates raises yet again the question of the flawed human-ness of the Black Panther over the possibility of overcoming it through an objective technologism. Nelson poses Afro-futurism as the possibility of coming up with "other stories to tell about cultures, technology and things to come."[46] The comic series as much as the film committed as they are to telling the future as much as the present remain mired, however, in the dead ends of the present, in which neither Killmonger nor T'Challa can come into their kingdom.

In the sheer style of the film and its visuality with its mélange of things African that are yet urbane and chic, there is a suggestion of a cosmopolitanism, literally easily worn. As Taiye Selasi put it pithily, "London meets Lagos meets Durban meets Dakar," and the question of home seems rather old-fashioned to say the least.[47] Although there may be the aspiration of "American accent, European affect, African ethos",[48] it is not all smooth sailing, for performativity is a luxury, a scarce commodity. It is the ability of Killmonger to traverse different terrains and cultures but not convincingly perform any of them wholly that dooms him. He prepares for death at the end of the film invoking a history of

44 Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R Delaney, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose," *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.
45 Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts," *Social Text* 20.2 (2002): 1.
46 Nelson, "Introduction," 9.
47 Taiye Selasie, "Bye-Bye Babar," *The Lip*, March 3, 2019. Accessed September 24, 2019. http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76/.
48 Selasie, "Bye-Bye Babar", 2.

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slavery with the bones of his ancestors, waiting and preying on his vision from the murky depth of the oceans. T'Challa's performance as king, philanthropist, diplomat, and politician seems to glide across the surface of histories, which probably explains Ta-Nehisi Coates's visceral denial of him. There is also the struggle in Priest, Hudlin, and Coates of extricating themselves from the constant salience of race in their worldmaking. Afro-futurism may be wishful thinking, but Afro-politanism appears merely frivolous. However, the performative impulse toward meaning, for oneself as much as for others, is as Selasie puts it, "a question of politics, rather than pigment, not all of us claim to be black."[49]

In all of this, however, it is not clear what it is that comes out of Africa, whether new or hoary. It is significant that vibranium, the fictive element, is characterized by its ability to absorb shock, vibration, and force. It is a metaphor for Africa's capacity for redemptive suffering, surviving through war, slavery, and deprivation. We can almost hear the verses of Tagore here in the eponymous poem he wrote on Africa. As a materialist Europe slouched toward war in the aftermath of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia that occasioned his poem, Tagore envisaged the continent's last words as being "Forgive."

> Come poet of the age/ Stand in the dying light of advancing nightfall/ At the door of despoiled Africa/ And say 'forgive, forgive'/ In the midst of murdering insanity/ May these be your civilization's last virtuous words.[50]

It is a capacity for forgiveness that arises from the capacity for infinite absorption of human wrong and cruelty. If we look back from this to ideas whether of futurism or cosmopolitanism, what becomes clear is Africa's capacity to serve as metaphor. Either it is the better performance of a scientific enterprise that originated elsewhere (a science imbued with compassion and not power or greed) or it is the fact of a benign, nonconfrontational cosmopolitanism, in which being African is the ability at least to pass as Western while staying African. Neither of these positions truly raise the question of what it would mean to dwell systematically on what can indeed come out of Africa.

It is here that I would like to propose the idea of Afri-fugism, deriving from the metaphor of the centrifuge. There is what radiates outward from the continent arising from the churning of African history, thought, and migration that is not only contingent on the idea of the expansion of Europe and the histories of slavery and forced migration. While preserving in the suffix, -fuge the spectral narratives of slavery—the fugitive, the refugee, and *maronnage*—Afri-fugism gestures toward a future, a true Afro-futurism that thinks with African epistemologies and visions—Nelson's "other stories." What would notions of human quality and freedom and of a world free of want mean if one thought with what comes out of Africa? How can we reflect beyond making of Africa a metaphor that is commensurable with Western notions of a universalism; an enterprise that would only in the end allow for no real differences or quiddity? This dilemma haunts the telling of the story of the Black Panther from McGregor to Coates and Coogler, and results in the folding back of the history of a continent with its multiple histories and

49 Selasie, "Bye-Bye Babar", 3.
50 Rabindranath Tagore, "Africa," in *Selected Poems of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. William Radice (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005).

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nations into a site of either hope or despair alone. Resisting the presentation of Africa as the place of a future utopian imagining means paying attention to what Africa generates: not the history told through slavery, nor colonialism, nor narratives of return. The move to decolonize the mind that Ngugi wa Thiong'o inaugurated a generation ago was about Africa telling its own stories and perhaps in its own languages.[51] It cannot become a metaphor for human suffering, a place of return and healing for those snatched away from it, nor can it be the site for all new knowledge. Beyond the unease felt by Hudlin and Coates about Africa as the lodestone for telling the stories of African Americans is the real heart of the matter. Africa needs to tell its own stories and think its own thoughts. There can be no looking homeward across the ocean for the African American; there can indeed be no telling the story of Africa only in terms of loss. Afri-fugism recognizes the impulse that it is only from the crucible of local history that something truly new can come: whether stories, knowledge, or heroes and heroines. The superpower that is needed is the thrust that can break free from the orbit of a paradigm of knowledge that says the future is about a mere catching up in order to repeat for itself narratives that come from elsewhere. Not perpetuation, not mere performance, not hopeful prolepsis, but rather, a robust production that is rooted in language, experience, and history.

51 Ngugi wa Thiong'O, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1986).

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