

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

OpenSIUC

Research Papers

Graduate School

Spring 5-7-2020

REIMAGINING TRAUMA THROUGH CINEMATIC HEALING AND LEGACY IN BLACK PANTHER

Eleuterio Lucca
eleuterio.lucca@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp

Recommended Citation

Lucca, Eleuterio. "REIMAGINING TRAUMA THROUGH CINEMATIC HEALING AND LEGACY IN BLACK PANTHER." (Spring 2020).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Papers by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

REIMAGINING TRAUMA THROUGH CINEMATIC HEALING AND LEGACY IN *BLACK*
PANTHER

by

Eleuterio Joshua Lucca III

B.A., Antioch College, 2016

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Science

Department of Mass Communications and Media Arts

in the Graduate School

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

May 2020

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

REIMAGINING TRAUMA THROUGH CINEMATIC HEALING AND LEGACY IN *BLACK*
PANTHER

by

Eleuterio Joshua Lucca III

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Mass Communications and Media Arts

Approved by:

Jan I. Thompson, Chair

Wago Kreider

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
April 13, 2020

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

Eleuterio Joshua Lucca III, for the Master of Science degree in Professional Media Management, presented on April 13, 2020, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: REIMAGINING TRAUMA: CINEMATIC HEALING AND LEGACY IN *BLACK PANTHER*

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Jan Thompson

In 2018, the first live action representation of the *Black Panther* character made it to the big screen. In this research paper, I will provide examples of how Afrofuturism and Blaxploitation not only led to the creation of this movie but more importantly led to its huge success. Afrofuturism and Blaxploitation were both movements in the black community that arose to combat harmful racist stereotypes in art, and I plan to specifically focus on how these movements affected the trajectory of black cinema in this paper. Afrofuturism is a form of resistance channeled through the science fiction genre which takes the traumas historically experienced by black community, products of racism, and reimagines stories of how black people move through the world and amass power in restorative ways.

Science fiction is a genre in which black people have been historically excluded from and Afrofuturism combats that. This genre plays heavily into the *Black Panther* movie in the technology and architecture on display. In the movie a fictional country, Wakanda, in Africa is at the forefront of technology, with advanced weaponry, vehicles, clothing and architecture but uses it to hide from the rest of the world protecting their valuable resources from colonizers. The simple concept of having the technology to remain hidden from outside oppressors is a prime example of Afrofuturism but *Black Panther* takes it one step further and poses the question if it is right to hide when others who are less fortunate suffer.

This modern-day exploration of Afrofuturism in the *Black Panther* film was not created

in a vacuum, however, and I hope to examine the ways that the Blaxploitation movement contributed to the history that eventually made *Black Panther* possible. While Afrofuturism aims to reject stereotypes, it also draws from themes that were popularized originally in Blaxploitation films.

As the first black comic book character, T'Challa, addressed a lot of racism in comic books as well as shared a name with the revolutionary political group who fought for equality in the black community. With this history it only makes sense that the *Black Panther* movie would have so much success in the midst of racism being brought to the forefront of our society due to technology and the ability to record and share to the world the very apparent forms of racism black people face every day.

Influences from the Blaxploitation can be seen in the way that *Black Panther*'s characters are portrayed on screen. Blaxploitation popularized the first black heroes, so it is not a far stretch to say it played a role in this black futuristic superhero movie. Throughout my graduate studies I found myself wanting to better understand the historical context that led to current iterations of Afrofuturism, but I couldn't find much literature connecting the two movements.

Although there were many problems in Blaxploitation films, including homophobia and sexism, to name a few, these movies nonetheless broke ground in the ways that they showed black individuals behaving heroically. Blaxploitation movies disproved the myth that nobody would pay to see black leads in films and defied box office norms. This may very well have led to *Black Panther* having a majority black cast and being a huge box office hit.

Through the inclusion of Afrofuturism and Blaxploitation, the *Black Panther* film was able to include black artists in the director's seat and costume design and many other off-screen positions. With the inclusion of many black artists in the creation of this movie, *Black Panther*

stood out as a resistance to racism inherent in the film industry. It allowed young black audiences to see people who look like them being heroes, intelligent, royalty; all things they may have not experienced before.

That's why I believe this movie was so important, and why it feels imperative to understand the historical context that contributed to the making of *Black Panther*. The importance of this film cannot be understated as it will open the door for similar movies to be made in the future just as Blaxploitation and Afrofuturism paved the way for it. In keeping with the tradition of Blaxploitation films, the release of this movie also changed minds about what is profitable, what is the status quo, and what the future holds for minorities in popular culture and large budget film productions. *Black Panther* broke records and in this paper, I will examine what made the film so successful and how we might try to understand Afrofuturism from a historical perspective.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT.....	i
LIST OF FIGURES	v
CHAPTERS	
CHAPTER 1 – HISTORY OF A SUPERHERO: BLACK PANTHER	1
CHAPTER 2 – AFROFUTURISM	3
CHAPTER 3 – DESTABILIZING STEREOTYPES.....	7
CHAPTER 4 – BLAXPLOITATION.....	10
CHAPTER 5 – KILLMONGER.....	12
CHAPTER 6 – W’KABI	16
CHAPTER 7 – QUEEN MOTHER.....	17
CHAPTER 8 – TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE	18
CHAPTER 9 – AFROFUTURISM CONTEXTUALIZED IN SCIENCE FICTION.....	21
CHAPTER 10 – WAKANDA	22
CHAPTER 11 – BLACK MAGIC	24
CHAPTER 12 – CONCLUSION	26
REFERENCES	27
VITA	29

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>FIGURE</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Figure 1 - Street Level View of Wakanda	4
Figure 2 - Killmonger	13
Figure 3 - Killmonger from a Diagonal Perspective.....	14
Figure 4 - Intro Animation.....	23

CHAPTER 1

HISTORY OF A SUPERHERO: BLACK PANTHER

On February 18, 2018, *Black Panther* was released by Marvel studios. Audiences had not experienced a superhero movie with this budget and a cast comprised primarily of Black actors directed by a Black man in superhero film history before. This film rejected dominant narratives about the Black experience by subverting cultural norms and expectations for a black film. It is not set in the ghetto, during slavery, or the Jim Crow era. The Black Panther figure exemplifies the values of Afrofuturism by helping young Black people examine their identity and how it pertains to the future. The film production exhibits many traits of Afrofuturism, but primarily representation, counternarratives, and pride in African culture. Its creation is significant to the trajectory of Black films in America because it adopts and subverts different expectations, by reinterpreting classic tropes and rejecting overused stereotypes.

In 2018, *Black Panther*, the first Marvel movie with a Black lead, was finally released. Marvel brought on Ryan Coogler, director of other racially charged films like *Creed* and *Fruitvale Station*, to direct this superhero movie. In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, (Breznican, 2017) Coogler reminisces about memories from his youth, when he discovered that characters Professor X and Magneto were created with inspiration from Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X. In this interview, he explains that Bishop, a Black mutant from the X-Men comics, significantly influenced his understanding of Black comic book characters. Unsatisfied with the limited number of Black characters in the comic books that he so enjoyed, he eventually found Black Panther when he went into a comic bookstore and asked, “you got any Black superheroes? Got anybody who looks like me?” (Breznican). Coogler recalls. “The first thing they did was walk me over to *Black Panther*.”

Being a long-time fan of the character makes Coogler an even better choice to direct this character's solo film. The unique challenges that present to a Black filmmaker add to the cultural significance of the making of this film, and to the significance of Coogler's involvement, especially in regards to conversations about representation and diversity in directing, a space in which "African Americans are routinely underrepresented as directors of sci-fi film franchises" (Erigha, 551). In an article about black filmmakers, writer Maryann Erigha explains that since Black directors are routinely excluded from making science fiction films and therefore lack access to a genre that can allow them to create narratives about the future that may not be as popular in other genres. Black directors are rather usually type-casted into genres such as "comedy and action with one-dimensional stories and formulaic narratives" (552). For a major company like Marvel to bring Coogler on means that door is open for more Black directors to have access to this genre in the future. When Black directors are given more space to create, they have the opportunity to bring new perspectives and ideas to how we imagine the future and the people that will inhabit this future.

CHAPTER 2

AFROFUTURISM

The movie opens by diving into the life of T'Challa, played by Chadwick Boseman, who takes on the responsibilities of both hero and king. From its opening scenes, it becomes apparent that the movie is inspired heavily by Afrofuturism, which is an “evolving field of study in Black cultural studies.” Afrofuturist theory is “heavily influenced with particularities in science fiction, speculative fiction, new media, digital technology, the arts, and Black aesthetics all situated and focused on the continent of Africa, the Diaspora, and its imaginaries” (Dean, 1). In *Black Panther*, one sees spaceships, high speed trains, futuristic architecture, and advanced armor and weaponry all juxtaposed with this tribal setting, African backdrop, and African inspired clothing.

In this clip we see a prime example of Afrofuturism. The scene takes place in a fictional technologically advanced nation, which is camouflaged from the outside world. It has hovering vehicles and holograms which contrast with the traditional clothing being worn by the citizens. There are baskets hanging on the walls; graffiti and artwork decorating the streets. The inclusion of scenes like these normalizes the juxtaposition of black people and technology. While people of color are typically erased, or at least sanitized, in science fiction imaginings of the future, here they exist within a world that has not been forced to sacrifice cultural history for technological advances. This is evident in the screenshot below.

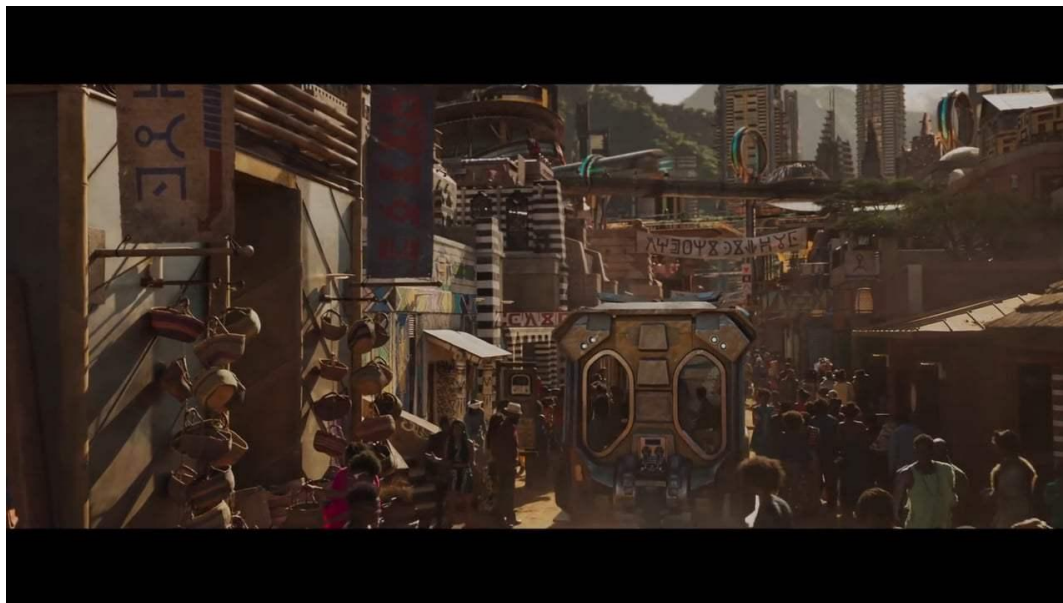


Figure 1. Street Level View of Wakanda

This juxtaposition is important because audiences rarely see African cultures that are advanced, and even more rarely is African culture presented in American films without an obvious history of colonization or western influences. The technological advancements seen in this movie also emphasize the important idea that even in the face of technology and wealth, African roots and culture maintain a source of pride for the film's complex characters. Here audiences are shown that advancement and economic success can coexist with non-Western cultures and traditions. Here, African cultures are not monolithic; rather, they are represented as multiplicitous and varied. Africa's beautiful landscapes are rarely honored in major film productions, and the continent is more often represented by scenes of poverty, malnutrition and primitive infrastructure. This new perspective about African culture seems to be gaining more popularity, perhaps mirroring society's desire for more Afrofuturistic art in general.

This further emphasizes the new Afrofuturistic movement making its way into major film productions, and more specifically the Marvel Cinematic Universe. While this type of representation is so rare in popular culture that it almost feels out of place in a major motion

picture, the Black Panther story has actually been a part of the Marvel Universe since the 1960s. Understanding the historical context that gave way to the creation of the Black Panther character is key to understanding its cultural significance now.

In July 1966, the Black Panther superhero was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. He made his comic book debut in issue #52 of the *Fantastic Four* series, and he was the first Black superhero to appear in a mainstream American comic book (Dockterman, 53). The fact that the Black Panther was born in a time that was particularly tumultuous for the United States regarding race, and that he is being reborn now as so many racial injustices are being brought to light with increased technology, is significant. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex and tumultuous time in our past, it's noteworthy that in the same decade of the Black Panther's birth, people of color being systematically beaten, lynched, and segregated. In response to the racist oppression of the time, victims of racism and their allies rose up and protested. Whether it was through marches, sit-ins, or by actively breaking racist laws, each person had their own form of resistance like the Black Panther Party.

In fall of 1966 the Black Panther Party was founded by Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and a handful of their friends in Oakland, California. Borrowing from the iconography and Black power ethos of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the platform of the Nation of Islam, and the revolutionary theories of Mao Tse-Tung, Frantz Fanon, and others, they forged an organization devoted to Black empowerment and direct confrontation with the state. (Johnson, 304)

The Black Panther character was created the same year that the Black Panther Party was born. For this reason, the fictional character's name was changed to Black Leopard for a short time, which was referenced in *Fantastic Four* comic #119 (Thomas, 1972) and when he was

asked why he changed his name T'Challa responds with the following: "I neither condemn nor condone those (referring to the Black Panther Party) who have taken up the name, but T'Challa is a law unto himself (Thomas, 1972)." This statement encapsulates the political perspective of the Black Panther character. While it may seem like a neutral position to take, in hindsight, the fact that this character did not condemn the actions of the Black Panther Party was a form of resistance and a radical statement at a time when many felt that they were dangerous. By remaining neutral, T'Challa was a source of comfort to those who were both in favor of and against the Black Panther Party. For some, simply reading about the Black Panther character may have felt like a form of resistance, as it allowed people of color to easily picture themselves as a powerful superhero.

CHAPTER 3

DESTABILIZING STEREOTYPES

The Black Panther character strategically “destabilizes previous analysis of Blackness” (Womack, 16). He is wealthy, intelligent, an expert strategist, and royalty. He is a King with enhanced abilities and a suit made of vibranium, a fictional metal, which is also the source of his great wealth.

Black Panther is just one example of how comic books have historically been a more progressive medium than film (Dockterman, 53). Although multiple comic book issues have been solely dedicated to the Black Panther character, unfortunately named *Jungle Action*, T’Challa did not make his first live-action appearance until 2016. One reason it may have taken over 50 years for this character to get his own solo film is because of how political his existence is. It would be easier for Marvel to stick with characters like Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor because they are white, rarely controversial, and well-known characters.

Not very many people know of T’Challa’s backstory but the name itself holds a lot of history that many are aware of. For some it feels like racial tensions are on the rise again just as they were 50 years ago, so it is only fitting that T’Challa is being reborn to help people of color celebrate Black culture once again. This new *Black Panther* film serves as “cinematherapy,” which is a way of analyzing film through a therapeutic lens. (Dantzler, 473)

By watching the films and discussing the stories, characters struggles, and moral dilemmas presented in specific movies, clients and therapist can access meaningful metaphorical content for clients. (Solomon, quoted by Dantzler, 473).

Dantzler goes on to explore how specific movies and plot points can be used to help connect with clients and the educational opportunities when the right movie is chosen. He finds

that cinema therapists have a specific list of movies they use in these therapeutic sessions, and none of those movies are superhero movies, but makes the argument that superhero movies, specifically Marvel movies, should be included in this list of cinematherapy films. His recommendation is specifically using *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Thor*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *The Avengers*; most of these movies dealing with some form of mental illness or dissatisfaction. While Dantzler makes a compelling case for the inclusion of these films in cinema therapy, it is worth noting that that this selection does not consider the perspective of a person of color who may have trouble relating to the films' respective white protagonists, which makes *Black Panther* a perfect candidate.

In *Black Panther*, the titular character himself also counters the most common narratives one commonly sees in archetypal Black science fiction characters. Black Panther is not a side character, not the comedic relief, nor is he a token minority. Often, superhero films fail because they allow Black characters fall into stereotypical, "standardized and simplified conceptions of people based on some prior assumptions; biases that support the status quo of power relations – they will always benefit whoever controls the culture" (Stevanovici, 74). To see *Black Panther* counter these stereotypes is refreshing.

If we use Rotten Tomatoes list of "100 Best Science Fiction Movies" as a reference, we can see none of the top 10 rated films have a Black lead. To find a movie with a Black character in a lead role you will have to scroll down to #43 where we find Will Smith in *Men in Black*. If we compare these two movies, we can see the two vastly different ways the characters are represented. In *Men in Black* Will Smith is the comedic relief, the character who is rough around the edges that the white character polishes and is one of the only people of color in the film. In the *Black Panther*, Chadwick Boseman is a serious, regal, and confident character who is

surrounded by a Black supporting cast of men and women including Michael B. Jordan, Lupita Nyong'o, Angela Bassett, Forest Whitaker, Danai Gurira, and Daniel Kaluuya. In contrast to the vast majority of mainstream films, there are only two white characters in *Black Panther*, played by Andy Serkis and Martin Freeman, and by no means do they steal the spotlight.

CHAPTER 4

BLAXPLOITATION

Black Panther is part of the lineage of Black films in America and has roots in Blaxploitation. Blaxploitation films introduced black heroes to the big screen in the 1970's and allowed for more complex black characters. *Black Panther* would not be the success it is today without the Blaxploitation movement in the 1970s. The Blaxploitation movement saw an increase in black action movies to meet a demand of audiences of the time. There is debate on whether the films helped black actors or merely exploited them but what can't be argued is that it opened the door for other black stories to be told and proved that people would pay to see films with black lead characters. Although it was mainly white filmmakers that profited off of these movies, the movement allowed black actors to find jobs and to make a name for themselves on the big screen. If we look at how Blaxploitation came to emerge, we can see that misrepresentation of black actors, the struggle of the civil rights movement, and Hollywood struggling financially all played important roles. People of color, and specifically Black people, have been excluded or misrepresented in most sci-fi films to date and the struggle for equality seems to be brought in the spotlight once again due to the advancement of technology. As for Hollywood's financial situation, the superhero genre is quite popular right now but up to this point, one can argue that black actors have not had many major roles in these films. Of the "Top Grossing Superhero Movies at the Box Office" seven of them had a black lead in the top 100, and three of them being Wesley Snipes in the Blade trilogy. With these numbers some may use this as evidence of the lack of profitability of Black leads in movies, but I believe it points to the lack of representation and opportunity in this genre ("Superhero": Box Office Mojo).

In the *Black Panther* film, we can see that the characters are complex and given

opportunities to be more than stereotypes. Two characters who struggle with internal conflict throughout the film are Killmonger and W'Kabi.

CHAPTER 5

KILLMONGER

Killmonger (played by Michael B. Jordan) is the villain in *Black Panther*, and his story begins with the death of his father by the hands of his uncle King T'Chaka. This tragic Killmonger trains to one day enact revenge and claim the throne of Wakanda. When he eventually makes it to his homeland of Wakanda, he states that by overtaking the Wakandan throne he would empower Black people all across the world. In this section of the film, Killmonger suggest arming black people to fight their oppressors. Killmonger is displayed as ruthless but intelligent, traits usually not attributed to strong black characters/villains.

From the scene, *KILLMONGER MAKES HIS CASE*:

KILLMONGER: Y'all sittin' up here comfortable. must feel good. there's about 2 billion people all over the world that looks like us but their lives are a lot harder, Wakanda has the tools to liberate them all.

T'CHALLA: And what tools are those?

KILLMONGER: Vibranium. Your weapons.

T' CHALLA: 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.

KILLMONGER: Not your own? But didn't life start here, on this continent? so ain't all people your people?

T'CHALLA: I am not King of all people. I am King of Wakanda. And it is my responsibility to make sure our people are safe and that vibranium does not fall into the hands of a person like you.

Although this is articulated to appear like a noble sentiment, he suggests using

Wakanda's superior technological advancements in weaponry to do so. Killmonger is eventually defeated, but he also changes T'Challa for the better. The liberation Killmonger hoped to facilitate is eventually achieved through education rather than violence. Had *Black Panther* been created in past decades as part of the Blaxploitation movement, Killmonger would almost certainly have fit into the role of the "buck"; a black person who is overly violent and sexual. "The black brute was a barbaric black out to raise havoc. Audience could assume that his physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed. In *The Birth of a Nation*, the black brutes, subhuman and feral, are the nameless characters setting out on a rampage full of black rage (Bogle, 10)."



Figure 2. Killmonger



Figure 3. Killmonger from a Diagonal Perspective

In both scenes pictured above, one can see the artistic choices that informed the camera angles used to portray a sense of power, savagery, and intelligence all without demeaning the subject in frame. Killmonger is flanked by two panthers, whose presence might suggest that T'Challa is alive. In the first scene, Killmonger stands backlit. A fire roars behind him, possibly as a metaphor for the destruction he has caused on his journey to the throne. Then, in the next scene, the shot starts upside down. It eventually corrects itself, perhaps symbolizing how Killmonger has disrupted the world of Wakanda and incited chaos. This scene uses those creative camera techniques demonstrates his power and strengths.

The film counters this narrative by bestowing Killmonger with a level of intelligence and believable motivation throughout the film. We can see hints of the “buck” character in his interactions with his female partner, especially when he kills her without remorse so that he can achieve his real goal of taking the throne of Wakanda. Killmonger is violent, but his violence takes a back seat to his motivation and strategies. If we wish to examine him through the lens of the Blaxploitation tradition, Killmonger is more reminiscent of Dan Freeman from *The Spook*

Who Sat by the Door. Although he is the villain, there are points where I found myself agreeing with Killmonger and his beliefs. In the past, the buck character was this uncontrollable evil that was never meant to be relatable or likable.

CHAPTER 6

W'KABI

W'Kabi (played by Daniel Kaluuya) is another character with a complicated story. Initially fierce in his loyalty to T'Challa, W'Kabi eventually supports Killmonger's suggestion of taking the world by force with the superior technology of Wakanda. We find out early in the movie that W'Kabi's family was murdered when Klaw infiltrated Wakanda and stole vibranium years ago, an origin story not dissimilar from that of Killmonger. When T'Challa has an opportunity to bring Klaw to justice, but fails, W'Kabi's loyalty is shaken. Not long after this does Killmonger make his entrance into Wakanda, carrying Klaw's dead body and a radical plan of liberation. It is no surprise W'Kabi begins to support him. Eventually W'Kabi is bested in battle by his partner, Okoye, and once again sides with T'Challa.

W'Kabi is a traitor. His loyalty initially lies with T'Challa, but when Black Panther fails to bring Klaw to justice his allegiances shift and he joins with Killmonger. This switch is understandable, but in the past his character would have been played as an uncle tom in such a way to portray him as spineless and doing what's best for his white counterparts. "Always as toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, n'er turn against their white massas (Bogle, 2)."

CHAPTER 7

QUEEN MOTHER

In *Black Panther*, Queen Mother (played by Angela Bassett) has a minimal role but still manages to subvert the “mammy” trope of Black female characters. Historically, the mammy is an asexual character whose only purpose is to complete domestic duties, often to her chagrin, and to witness other character’s decisions with a caricatured exasperation. This archetype is almost always portrayed as the servant and helper to the protagonist. The mammy character can be seen most often played by Hattie McDaniel in the 1930’s. Her most famous work being “Mammy” in *Gone with the Wind*. “Hattie McDaniel’s character is motivated almost solely out of concern for the master's family, but her Mammy also feels confident enough to express anger toward her masters. She berates and hounds anyone who goes against her conception of right and wrong (Bogle, 76).” Angela Bassett’s Queen Mother, on the other hand, is a kind and regal woman who bestows advice on her children and, when necessary, protects them. Her sexuality is muted, but this is understandable because it is established that her husband has recently passed away.

CHAPTER 8

TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE

The main source of conflict for our protagonist in *Black Panther* are T'Challa's struggles to be a good king. T'Challa must contend with the question of whether to provide aid to the parts of the world that are struggling, by providing financial aid, receiving refugees, scientific advancements, while he is also dealing with the internal threat of Killmonger. This juxtaposition between having one's resources utilized by outsiders or exhausted by an insider is the ultimate question for popular culture at this present moment, as the United States grapples with its history of racist oppression.

Like the Black Panther character himself, director Ryan Coogler is herein defying the status quo, further entrenching the entire film in the basic tenets of Afrofuturism. There is a myriad of various, sometimes entirely different definitions of Afrofuturism, so it can be difficult to conceptualize concisely. Afrofuturism is not an objective philosophy or framework that is set in stone or clearly defined. Rather, it allows each participant to create their own version of future worlds for those with African roots. One common thread in Afrofuturism poses that Afrofuturist art contextualizes trauma in an alternative perspective, one that is transformative, and allows Black people to be hopeful for the future. Some argue that the purpose of Afrofuturism is the "Excavation of the past - the unearthing and construction of counternarratives to restore the humanity of African descendant populations in the wake of erasures, omissions and silences as a consequence of imperial incursions, domination, and slavery" (Jackson, 1).

In the United States, it may be hard for people of color to see themselves in the future. With racism and police brutality made ever visible by increasing accessibility of communication technology, there seems to be few hopeful of the future for people of color. Despite our current

administration's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again," for some, America's past is a painful example of injustice. Therefore, greatness can therefore be more easily imagined in a future context. This means that for many, Afrofuturism is a protest, a radical form of therapy, and an exercise in joy and healing. It is so much more than spaceships and wild wardrobes-- it is a movement to show the world that people of African descent are not the products of their past but rather creators of the future. Afrofuturism allows descendants of slaves to rewrite this history of pain and oppression into a story of survival and evolution. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the final acts of *Black Panther* when T'Challa and Shuri are in California talking about the future. See the following dialogue from the scene *T'CHALLA OPENS AN OUTREACH*

CENTER:

T'Challa and Shuri, dressed in subtle clothing, look at the now abandoned apartment building.

In the distance, a group of six kids (mostly Black, some Latino), play three on three on a rugged basketball hoop.

SHURI: when you said you would take me to California for the first time, I thought you meant Coachella, or Disneyland. Why here?

T'CHALLA: This is where our father killed our uncle.

Shuri looks at T'Challa, shocked by his bluntness. she turns and stares closely at the building.

We see her POV of larger signage that hints that the building is soon to be demolished.

SHURI: They are tearing it down. Good.

T'CHALLA: They're not tearing it down... I bought this building.

Shuri turns to him confused.

T'CHALLA: And that building, and that one over there... This will be the first Wakandan International Outreach Center.

Shuri smiles at the surprise.

T'CHALLA: Nakia will oversee the social outreach... And you will spearhead the science and information exchange.

Shuri turns to T'Challa in shock at what this means.

SHURI: You're kidding!

CHAPTER 9

AFROFUTURISM CONTEXTUALIZED IN SCIENCE FICTION

Science fiction can be the medium for these myriad interpretations and counter-narratives put forth by Afrofuturism. Although it is fiction, this genre is often a vehicle for social commentaries about our current society and the possibilities that await us if we can just imagine them. The employment of Afrofuturism by science fiction allows people of color to create a future that includes them and people who look just like them in order to change the cultural experience in the real world.

Not uncommonly, the genre of science fiction often uses slave narratives in the context of the future to tell certain stories like *Blade Runner*, where artificial intelligence is placed in humanoids that are subsequently exploited as slave labor (Veen, 66-67). Even though slave narratives are often used to make social commentary on injustice, there is often a lack of diversity and representation in those films. *Star Wars* and *Blade Runner* are just two examples of this, the latter having more of a focus on a slave narrative. Both films were initially released in the early 1980's and remade (or sequelized) in 2017. In *Blade Runner*, there are robots that are used as slave labor, but they look exactly like the human characters in the film. The cast is primarily white, and the film comments on genetic modification and advancements in technology but fails to represent a diverse population. This did not change in the 2017 sequel. *Star Wars* uses slave plotlines to demonstrate villainy. In a departure from the part taken by *Blade Runner*, the *Star Wars* franchise made conscious decisions to increase diversity in their more recent films by casting more non-white actors.

CHAPTER 10

WAKANDA

Black Panther counteracts the traditional slave narrative by creating a fictional African Nation, Wakanda, which has somehow not been colonized by Western forces. This idea of an uncolonized African nation that is thriving and more advanced than its western counterparts counteracts narratives that still holdover from the era of American slavery, which was the idea that Africans were savages and that to enslave and domesticate them was to help them. The very presence of the Black Panther and the nation of Wakanda actively resists the narrative in the media about people of color and especially people of African descent. Wakanda is a highly advanced country mainly due to the presence of vibranium, a fictional metal which is highly valuable, and the wisdom and foresight of its leaders, who can maintain the country's national resources while creating advanced infrastructure. This combination of insightful governance and protected resources allows the country to be one of the most technologically advanced nations in the Marvel universe. Wakandans, at times in the comics, keep their treasure and city hidden from the world as to preserve their way of life and to protect themselves from those who would want to harm them or steal from them, creating a narrative that is quite different from how Americans generally tend to understand "third-world" and African countries.

The use of animation in the opening sequence speaks volumes to how this movie uplifts a place and culture that is rarely seen of advanced. It counters the narrative that at a certain point in Africa's history slavery was the only thing happening. It suggests that when isolated from western influences an African country could thrive and become even more advanced than their western counterparts who dominate the narrative around that time in history.



Figure 4. Intro Animation

CHAPTER 11

BLACK MAGIC

Black Panther also departs from common superhero narratives with his abilities as well. His powers are not his whole identity. Rather, what makes Black Panther special is his intelligence, leadership, and strong will, which in combination with one another allow him not only to fight crime but to lead one of the most advanced fictional nations in the world. This is not to say that Black Panther is better than any hero who relies on their powers heavily but is noted to emphasize the fact that too often are Black characters fetishized and rendered inhuman by making them “magical” (Winslow, 5). “Although magical abilities may not seem like a negative attribute, consistently portraying African Americans [. . .] as magical in television programs and films serves to reinforce whiteness [. . .] as the invisible centers of normalcy” (Winslow, 5). Luke Winslow goes on to reference Heather Hicks in her article “Hoodoo Economics: White Men’s Work and Black Men’s Magic in Contemporary American Films.” In this article Hicks refers to multiple movies like *The Green Mile*, *Unbreakable* and *Bruce Almighty* where the Black characters are not only magical, but their powers are mainly used to assist their white co-stars (Hicks, 29).

In the film *The Green Mile* Michael Clarke Duncan plays John Coffey, a man accused of murdering two children, has powers that he uses to remove sickness from his white co-stars. The guards must struggle with the idea that even though Coffey looks intimidating he does not seem to have the demeanor of a killer and his gift only reinforces that. As the movie progresses Coffey’s innocence seems to become clearer to the audience but in the end, Coffey does not receive the justice he deserves, which is an all too familiar story for oppressed minorities. *Bruce Almighty* stars Morgan Freeman as God who gives Jim Carrey's character, Bruce, who believes

God is treating him unfairly. The purpose of Morgan Freeman's character seems to only teach Bruce a lesson and to assist him in becoming a better person. Morgan Freeman's character only ever interacts with Jim Carrey's and this opportunity to display God as a person of color and to comment on what could be a controversial topic, the movie seems to skirt around that fact.

In contrast, T'Challa chooses to cooperate with white characters but only if helping them will allow him to accomplish his goals. Black Panther is a great idol for many young Black children because "what is largely absent from such celebratory discourses are the problematic repercussions of technology, such as disconnection, and the anxieties that can arise when our actual physical embodiment does not measure" (Chan, 77). Black Panther offers an example of Black representation which allows children to see themselves in characters that are wealthy, powerful Black men and women who simultaneously embrace African heritage while creating space for themselves in the future. *Black Panther* is not an island in this way of developing Black identity, and there are organizations across the country, like the Children's Defense Fund of Nashville, TN, which seeks to "explore how Black youth envision an alternative Afro-future in the face of disparaging forces pathologizing and criminalizing their Blackness even before they have had the chance to grasp what that future could be" (Dean, 4). While hugely significant in the world of filmmaking, *Black Panther* is a small part of a larger national discussion about the continuation of Black identity in future-oriented narratives.

CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSION

Hopefully, the *Black Panther* film is the first step towards the emergence of Afrofuturism and greater diversity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe in many aspects. The Black Panther character himself exhibits characteristics that break down previous misconceptions of Black superheroes and Black characters in general, not to mention the fact that being the first Black superhero to have their own feature film in the MCU is a huge accomplishment itself.

This progression toward more diverse representations of the future is not only present in the character himself, but in the production of the movie as well. The film displays aspects of African culture in a way that promotes pride and admiration for the people, culture, and landscape which is otherwise often lacking in American cinema. As well as having a diverse cast and a Black director, this movie broke a lot of boundaries and shook up the superhero genre in a big way. Pulling immensely from Afrofuturism, the film followed key principles of Afrofuturism to create a futuristic world that young people of color could feel empowered to be a part of and feel free to imagine themselves. Through that empowerment and imagination, hopefully this film serves as a sort of healing process for those who constantly see racial injustice in their daily lives and in the media. Black Panther will hopefully be the first of many films that will counter the status quo and create worlds where all are included and invited to be a part of the future.

REFERENCES

- Bogle, Donald E., et al. "Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1974, p. 55., doi:10.2307/1225251.
- Breznican, Anthony. "'Black Panther' Director Ryan Coogler Has a Moving Story About the Day Marvel Hired Him." *EW.com*, 14 July 2017, ew.com/movies/2017/07/14/ryan-coogler-moving-memory-day-hired-Black-panther-director/.
- Chan, Melanie. *Virtual Reality: Representations in Contemporary Media*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014.
- Dantzler, Jamoki Zakia. "How the Marvel Cinematic Universe Represents Our Quality World: An Integration of Reality Therapy/Choice Theory and Cinema Therapy." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, vol. 10, no. 4, Feb. 2015, pp. 471–487., doi:10.1080/15401383.2014.994796.
- Dean, Terrance, and Dale P. Andrews. "Introduction: Afrofuturism in Black Theology – Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the State of Black Religion in the Black Metropolis." *Black Theology*, vol. 14, no. 1, Feb. 2016, pp. 2–5., doi:10.1080/14769948.2015.1131499.
- Dockterman, Eliana. "The First Black Superhero Leaps to the Silver Screen." *Time*, 16 May 2016.
- Erigha, Maryann. "Do African Americans Direct Science Fiction or Blockbuster Franchise Movies? Race, Genre, and Contemporary Hollywood." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 47, no. 6, 2016, pp. 550–569., doi:10.1177/0021934716653348.
- Hicks, Heather. "Hoodoo Economics: White Men's Work and Black Men's Magic in Contemporary American Films." *Camera Obscura*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2003, pp. 27–55.

Jackson, Sandra, and Julie E. Moody-Freeman. *The Black imagination, science fiction, futurism and the speculative*. Peter Lang, 2011.

Johnson, Cedric. "Panther Nostalgia as History: Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party Joshua Bloom Martin Waldo E.Jr. Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0520271852." *New Labor Forum*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2014, pp. 112–115., doi:10.1177/1095796014526572.

Stefanovici, Smaranda. "Black STEREOTYPES IN AMERICAN MOVIES." 2014.

"Superhero." *Box Office Mojo*, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=superhero.htm>.

Thomas, Roy. *Fantastic Four*. Vol. 119, Marvel Comics, 1972.

Veen, Tobias C. Van. *AFROFUTURISM 2.0: the rise of astro-Blackness*. LEXINGTON BOOKS, 2017.

Winslow, Luke, et al. *Limited Representation: A Homology of Discriminatory Media Portrayals of Little People and African Americans*. Conference Papers -- National Communication Association, 2007.

Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago Review, 2013.

"100 Best Science Fiction Movies of All Time." *Rotten Tomatoes Movie and TV News 100 Best Science Fiction Movies of All Time Comments*, editorial.rottentomatoes.com/guide/best-sci-fi-movies-of-all-time/5/.

VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Eleuterio Joshua Lucca III

joshualucca7@gmail.com

Antioch College
Bachelor of Arts, Media Arts, July 2016

Research Paper Title:

Reimagining Trauma: Cinematic Healing and Legacy in *Black Panther*

Major Professor: Jan I. Thompson