



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 22
Issue 1 April 2018

Article 43

3-30-2018

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Daniel White Hodge
North Park University, dwhodge@northpark.edu

Recommended Citation

Hodge, Daniel White (2018) "“Hi Auntie”: A Paradox of Hip Hop Socio-Political Resistance in Killmonger," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 , Article 43.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol22/iss1/43>

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Abstract

This is one of a series of film reviews of *Black Panther* (2018), directed by Ryan Coogler.

Keywords

Black Panther, Marvel, Race, Superheroes



I am not going to sit here and write to you that I held Erik Killmonger, played by Michael B. Jordan, in a traditional antagonist manner. Jordan’s character was a complex one fraught with the intricacies held deep within the Black community here in these United States. I cannot say I completely disagreed with his overall premise either; giving materials that can help free those in oppression is a large part of my own life ethos—granted, they are not filled with vibranium. Yet, Killmonger’s pursuit of justice and freedom of those that “look like him” creates a major paradox for those seeking “super-hero” type justice. In other words, the story arc of super-heroes is one that typically achieves their means by agreeable and “justified” means—even if it involves violence. But, Killmonger presents a different way in that he wants to use the technology and resources of Wakanda to wage war against the colonizers. This paradox has been at the heart of civil rights movements for over a century. It is the paradox of unpopular and non-justified violence in order to achieve the goals of equity. Killmonger presents us with an interesting

proposal and this proposal is also one at the core of Hip Hop culture—which is central to the scoring of the film.

Let us parse this out further. Hip Hop, as a culture, has a strong bend towards what Killmonger is presenting. No, Hip Hop is not attempting to kill anyone callously. No, Hip Hop is not an “enemy.” Yet, Hip Hop does advocate for the oppressed to be mindful and thoughtful about their resistance to oppressive conditions which include oppressive people. Thus, Hip Hop does advocate for one to keep pushing toward a means of justice. Does that include violence in that push? Not necessarily, but, then again, Blacks have tried a lot of methods to achieve justice and, as the current socio-political era would tell us, things are dire racially speaking and how much death of Black bodies can one group endure? To look at this yet another way, let me give my definition of the core of Hip Hop Culture:

Hip Hop is an urban sub-culture that seeks to express a life-style, attitude, and/or urban individuality. Hip Hop at its core—not the commercialization and commodity it has become in certain respects—rejects dominant forms of culture and society and seeks to increase a social consciousness along with a racial/ethnic pride. Thus, Hip Hop uses rap music, dance, music production, MCing, and allegory as vehicles to send and fund its message of social, cultural, and political resistance to dominate structures of norms.¹

Note the parts of this definition which emphasize rejection of dominant forms of culture; message of resistance to social, cultural, and political spaces. This is powerful. This is part of what Killmonger is after. Therefore, Hip Hop is a central theme throughout the film. To prove this point even further, Kendrick Lamar, the quintessential post-soul Hip Hop theologian², is behind the film’s soundtrack. Laced with tracks that speak from the definition of Hip Hop culture, Lamar is challenging minds to think about resistance.

Now, Killmonger has problems, many in fact. Some have noted how he is no lover of women given that he does not hesitate in murdering his own partner and is quick to violently

attack one of the keepers of the herb. Killmonger admits he has killed many, just to get to the throne to fight T'Challa. That's problematic on many levels, even if we do not see the carnage he has wrought. Thus, I am not suggesting that Killmonger is some type of anti-villain. What I am suggesting is that his points are valid in that the pursuit of justice and freedom from oppressors would be great if we had the technology and tools to do so.

Hip Hop presents this type of resistance and bold proclamation in many of its artists which have been and continue to be controversial: Tupac Shakur, Kanye West, J Cole, Paris, Jasiri X, Kendrick Lamar, and even more pop artists like Remy Ma and Lil' Kim. Rap artists continue to create a space for resistance and while the pursuit of that should be seated in peaceful means, there is an element that asks, "What happens when those peace talks fail, what next?" Thus, this paradox.

Killmonger is challenging this notion that the process to justice and ending oppression be neat, tidy, and comfortable for the oppressor. This is something that not many want to revel in. But, one has to ask, whose pain, suffering, and story is the one that gets valued, told, supported, and avenged? Is it wrong that gang members engage in some of the same retaliatory methods that the US military uses when one of "their own" is killed? Is it morally wrong to say that one death is valued over the other? How does one contend with a God which appears to be on "one side?" In this state of a double standard ethos, voices have emerged to call out this injustice within Hip Hop culture and rap music. Tricia Rose tells us that "rap arose in a postindustrial city context in which artists and listeners are able to shape their own social community through the music."³ Moreover, Rose also says that Hip Hop is a source for youth for alternative identity formation and social status in a community with "war like conditions."⁴ Michael Eric Dyson has argued that Hip Hoppers were able to conjure up a certain type of capital from the misery and pain of

inner city living—of which Killmonger was a part. Dyson contends that, “Hip-hoppers joined pleasure and rage while turning the details of their difficult lives into craft and capital.”⁵ Hip Hoppers have called attention to the ghetto and argued that it too, is valid, real, and worthy of the same retribution and vindication of which the broader United States is worthy, even if it means acquiring that vengeance by violent means. Killmonger, who has worked for the US military, is fully aware of this too.

So, in this manner, rapper Ice Cube narrates that “...it’s time to take a trip to the suburbs, let em see a nigga invasion, point blank on a Caucasian. Cock the hammer then crack a smile, take me to your house pal” (AmriKKKa’s *Most Wanted* 1991). In this song, Cube describes what might happen if ignoring such issues continues. To the naked eye and ear, one might consider this to be “obscene” and “too violent.” Yet, these are very similar discourses to those of Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush in describing the “insurgents” who invaded “our country.” One must ask, what is truly the difference?

Such narratives closely resemble the violence in patriotic speech in which attacking and killing is celebrated and venerated through other religious discourse. In other words, hegemonic violence is celebrated and glorified, but insurgent and urban violence is not. The uprisings that took place in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray at the hands of yet another police unit is a precise example. Pastors, celebrities, and pundits on both sides of the aisle had prescribed memes for the protesters in Baltimore. “Why are you doing this,” “Stop the violence,” and “You don’t get nothing out of violence” were all memes sent to the protestors. Former NFL player Ray Lewis even recorded a video pleading with “his people” to “stop the violence” and that “this is not the way.” Yet, did these same voices have the same message to the Baltimore police department? Was there national outcry and prescribed memes for the armed security units

attacking peaceful protestors? Yet airstrikes and drone attacks are celebrated when a nationally defined "enemy" is attacked.

Killmonger is presenting a paradox that will not easily be solved. His sarcastic greeting to Queen Ramonda, "Hi Auntie," is a reminder to those who sit in comfort and ease that the fight is still on. Moreover, things are not okay, and every once in a while those in the upper reaches of society need to be reminded that social issues are growing; the disparity between Blacks and Whites is not decreasing; racism is at an all-time high. And so, Killmonger brings a greeting that should bring a rude reminder to the struggle that Hip Hop has been attempting to tell the United States for over four decades.

¹ Daniel White Hodge, *Hip Hop's Hostile Gospel: A Post-Soul Theological Exploration* ed. Warren Goldstein, Center for Critical Research on Religion and Harvard University (Boston, MA: Brill Academic, 2017).

² Hodge, 57-90.

³ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 78-85.

⁴ Rose, 34.

⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap : Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 177.

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