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Black Panther Shatters Social Binaries to Explore Postcolonial Themes: How Ancestry, Identity, Revenge, and the Third Space Impact the Ability to Navigate Change and Create New Forms of Cultural Hybridity

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Black Panther Shatters Social Binaries to Explore Postcolonial

Themes: How Ancestry, Identity, Revenge, and the Third Space

Impact the Ability to Navigate Change and Create New Forms of

Cultural Hybridity

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Hybridity

ABSTRACT

Black Panther Shatters Social Binaries to Explore Postcolonial Themes: How Ancestry, Identity, Revenge, and the Third Space Impact the Ability to Navigate Change and Create New Forms of Cultural Hybridity

by Deborah J. Paquin

In a world climate stricken by hatred, polarity, and revenge, the movie *Black Panther* continues to offer a unique perspective on pertinent postcolonial themes that still haunt today. This paper will review how the movie reverses, eliminates, or shatters social binaries to explore such postcolonial themes as: Gothicism, anticolonialism, Orientalism, gender roles, hybridity, and ancestry. Through its characters and their relationships, I will analyze how the film presents overriding factors, such as ancestry, heritage, identity, trauma, anger, hatred, and revenge, and how they impact an individual's ability to successfully navigate change. This includes exploring how the film offers resolutions through its main character's ability to enter and dwell within Homi Bhabha's Third Space in order to innovate, transform, and create new forms of cultural hybridity.

By reviewing and comparing postcolonial principles of pioneering theorists, such as Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha, we will see how *Black Panther* interprets these concepts and presents them in innovative ways to cultivate a means of understanding and reformation in today's highly politicized climate. Through the fictional country of Wakanda, *Black Panther* celebrates ancestral heritage and rises above restrictive binaries to overcome isolationist and exclusionary thought in order to create new and meaningful postcolonial roadmaps for the future. In a nod to Bhabha's concept of a Third Space, Wakanda

seeks to create and reconstruct a new "nationness, community interest, and "cultural value"

(Bhabha 2). *Black Panther* embraces heritage while shattering social binaries to provide lessons

on how to navigate cultural hybridity and continual change.

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1 Introduction

In the movie *Black Panther*, there is an exchange between the younger, technically astute sister of the new king, T'Challa, where she chides her brother: "How many times do I have to teach you, just because something works, doesn't mean that it cannot be improved."

This line seems to characterize the dynamics at play throughout the movie *Black Panther*. It foreshadows the struggle that King T'Challa will face as he grapples with how to balance the country's strong heritage and ancestral past with the need to evolve and survive in an everchanging world.

It is surprising how the Marvel superhero film *Black Panther* plays into such a number of postcolonial themes such as: Gothicism, anticolonialism, Orientalism, gender roles, hybridity, and ancestry. The movie uniquely examines social and cultural binaries through its strong characters, and often flips, or even shatters, those binaries in order to isolate and expose postcolonial premises and issues. By stripping away social norms, the movie magnifies the issues at hand and helps expose old ways of thinking dictated by cultural biases.

In a current world climate, stricken by hatred and polarization, *Black Panther* offers a unique perspective on pertinent postcolonial themes that still impact us today. It is through the characters and relationships in *Black Panther* that we see how overriding factors, such as ancestry, heritage, identity, trauma, anger, hatred, and revenge, impact the ability to successfully navigate change. Those characters who are able to dwell within Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" show a vulnerability and adaptability that allows them to innovate and transform to create a new form of cultural hybridity.

This paper reviews how the movie interprets the principles of postcolonial theorists, such as Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha, to determine which concepts are still valid today, and how they can be used to cultivate means of understanding and reform in today's highly politicized climate. In the end, *Black Panther* will take us on a postcolonial journey, highlighting how individuals, as well as its fictional country of Wakanda, can rise above restrictive binaries, and isolationist and exclusionary thought, to create new and meaningful postcolonial roadmaps for the future.

2 How are Gothicism and anticolonialism represented in *Black Panther*?

The movie *Black Panther* focuses on the fictional African country of Wakanda, which took a proactive anticolonial approach in order to preserve its heritage and avoid the occupation, or colonization, by outsiders. The home country of Wakanda used two anticolonial strategies to achieve this. First, it represented itself to the world as an impoverished "Third World"[1] country with no resources. Second, Wakanda did not engage in trade or take aid. To the outside world, this Afrofuturistic country presented a Gothic look and feel in order to exploit the Western world's interpretation of the country. It could do this because Wakanda was sitting on the world's strongest and most valuable mineral: vibranium. With vibranium, the country could develop weapons to defend itself, as well as develop the earth's most advanced medical and technical achievements.

With 90.4 percent of Africa under colonial control by 1900,[2] Wakanda was well-aware of the effects of colonization. Therefore, the country decided that its best approach was to not become colonized in the first place. The elders of Wakanda, who lived through the chaos of World War II, determined to keep their advancements a secret and pursue an isolationist policy to hide in plain sight. Using their technology, the country hid behind a hologram presenting a backward African nation to the rest of the world. Once the Wakandans entered into their own air space, a somewhat supernatural and Gothic-looking city appears. This Gothic village, yet modern city, mixes ancestral tribal color, costume, arts, and craftwork, alongside ultra-modern

technological advancements. Its labyrinthic streets evoke Gothic gloom and mystery, yet flow

with a prosperous people. This setting encompasses what Fred Botting describes in his book

Gothic:

> Gothic atmospheres—gloomy and mysterious—have repeatedly signaled the
>
> disturbing return of pasts upon presents and evoked emotions of terror and
>
> laughter. In the twentieth century, in diverse and ambiguous ways, Gothic figures
>
> have continued to shadow the progress of modernity with counter-narratives
>
> displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values. (Botting 1–2)

This Gothic imagery is important to a central theme of the movie, the clash between

preserving the ancestral past while engaging with a changing world. One of the constant

Wakandan chants throughout the film is: "Praise to the Ancestors." This Gothic presence

therefore creates this ominous shadow of the past that is starting to become counterproductive to

Wakanda's future. With the transition to a new king, we will see how T'Challa will be haunted

by his strong ancestral connection to the past and how he will lead for the future. The Gothic

backdrop represents the next generation's struggle between the ancestral isolationist past and the

changing world of the present.

From generation to generation, the Wakandans melded their tribal heritage and customs

with the modern. This culture respected its elders and sought to preserve its traditions. They

chose to seek a peaceful lifestyle without the interferences of others and fiercely protected their

secret resources. Essentially, they mirrored back to the world what the world wanted to see in a

Third World country in order to protect themselves and their way of life. This anticolonial

approach meant that they were able to stay in control of their resources, people, and government,

in order to preserve their culture. However, the same tactics used to isolate itself from a

destructive world also obstructed its people and future generations from interaction with the world.

The Wakandans' fear of the outside world prevented them from being engaged in the world openly. This isolationist policy created factions within the country. A chief complaint of its younger generation was that while Wakandans did not use their weapons to become oppressors, they also were not of service to their fellow man. As the new king, T'Challa told his deceased father in one of his visions, he felt they had turned their back on the outside world. The ruling council, and many within Wakanda, wanted to keep the status quo. They feared opening their resources and borders to refugees, because if "you let refugees in, they bring all of their problems with them."

This same issue can be seen today as countries grapple with massive influxes of immigration, which impacts and strains the resources and social structures of the countries they immigrate to. Since Wakanda's younger generation, who did not live through the war, desires to bring their technological and medical advancements to the world, it creates an intergenerational struggle.

While this plays out at the country level, it is also shown on a personal level for T'Challa. T'Challa's fiancé, Nakia, was a proponent of re-engaging with the world and coming forward with their advancements. But T'Challa, as the new Black Panther, or head of state in Wakanda, warned that, "If the world found out what we truly are, and what we possess—we could lose our way of life." This advocacy of isolationism is something that Salman Rushdie discusses in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991.* Again, this will seem like a contradiction since Wakanda was flourishing and not impoverished, but Rushdie warned that, "The largest and most dangerous pitfall would be the adoption of a ghetto mentality: to forget

that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers" (Rushdie 19). While most conceptions of a ghetto are of a slum or racially oppressive segregation, another dictionary definition of the term ghetto is "an isolated group." By highlighting the latter instead of the former meaning, the film is showing us a mirror reversal of typical postcolonial frameworks in order to magnify the results of Wakanda's self-imposed isolation.

This is an example of how the film flips a social norm, such as juxtaposing an impoverished ghetto with an isolated group that is economically flourishing. In the opening scenes, we have T'Challa, head of a unified, peaceful, and advanced African state, contrasted with Erik Killmonger, a boy in the urban ghetto of Oakland, California with rap music booming in the background. Both ghettos are Black. This is the first depiction we see of the protagonist T'Challa and his soon-to-be antagonist, Erik Killmonger. The film is creatively exploding a black versus white binary by isolating out skin color. By stripping out the racial stereotype that all Blacks exist in underserved urban communities, the movie can better explore the social and economic repercussions of colonialism.

While the Wakandans may have been technologically advanced, and even sent spies into the world, their fear may have emerged from the social discourse taking place in other countries. This notion is supported by a statement from the Card University Postcolonial Studies website that offers this critique, "However distorted the image the West imposes on the Third World, an equally distorted view of the West prevails in many Third World countries: perception is a larger problem than colonialism." The Wakandans were falling prey to their own ethnocentric viewpoints based on their perceptions of the outside world. They felt their resources would be drained by the demands of the world of refugees and did not want humanitarian demands placed

upon them. This fear reinforced their protectionist views and isolated them from the world.

With this background of the country's internal dynamics, we will now see how the country began to create the demon that was going to haunt them. T'Challa's uncle, N'Jobu, tried to discuss the desire to help their African-American counterparts with his brother, the previous king, T'Chaka. As the younger brother of King T'Chaka, N'Jobu had been sent to America as a spy. When N'Jobu saw the suffering there, he wanted Wakanda to help. However, the King showed his own form of authoritarian rulership by not listening to other viewpoints or considering any change. The King remained frozen in Wakanda's isolationist policies, fearful that any change would endanger his people. Therefore, this form of revolt had been brewing for some time. It is N'Jobu's betrayal of Wakanda that seeds the drama in *Black Panther*.

Franz Fanon warns about this kind of holding on too tightly to the past, or trying to return to a precolonial past. In his discussion of postcolonialism, Robert Dale Parker says that Fanon saw "distortions in such romanticizing dreams and believed that the precolonial past could never be recovered, because colonized cultures—like all cultures—change continuously" (Parker 291). When King T'Chaka refused to listen or reflect upon change, N'Jobu decided to take matters into his own hands. N'Jobu betrayed the location of Wakanda's vibranium with the intent to help arm those oppressed in America, and elsewhere, who could not fight back against their oppressors.

To execute on this plan, N'Jobu sought the help of the villain, Ulysses Klaue, a white South African (I don't think we need to call out the postcolonial inferences embodied in that connotation!) Klaue triggered a bomb at the border that took a number of Wakandan lives as he stole a quarter ton of vibranium. When the king tried to hold N'Jobu accountable and take him back to Wakanda for trial, N'Jobu tried to kill the informant, James. King T'Chaka came to James' defense, which resulted in the King killing his own brother to save another. King

T'Chaka then made a fateful decision to leave Erik, N'Jobu's young son, behind in America. Erik, was born of an American mother and a Wakandan father. We now have Wakanda's first issue of hybridity. The boy had been told the enchanting Wakandan ancestral stories from a young age, but after finding his father murdered, he blamed the Wakandans and spent his adult life seeking revenge.

The first step in his vengeful scheme took place in what the movie calls "a" British museum. It is here that Erik, now "Killmonger," turns his anger and hatred back onto the world's top colonizer: Britain. His goal is to steal vibranium, that is hidden in plain sight within the museum, in order to carry out a bigger plan of world domination. The implicit joke here is that the patriarchal museum expert has no idea what they really possess. After brutally killing the guards, Killmonger crashes into a museum display case to steal an ancient tool that no one realizes is made of vibranium. Erik then triumphantly proclaims he is only taking back from the British what their soldiers stole from his ancestors.

Erik no longer felt a sense of family or ancestral connection. His father had instilled the notion of love for the homeland, telling him bedtime stories and describing the most beautiful sunsets. The boy, once left behind, was considered an outsider to the Wakandans, yet he was "othered" in his postcolonial American homeland as well. Erik was traumatized by his father's death. This robbery was his retaliatory anticolonial move. The British museum was merely an interim step. Erik's real focus is to exact revenge on Wakanda, take over the vibranium, then arm his oppressed brothers throughout the world. In addition, Erik also stole an ancient mask just because he was "feeling it."

These two moves accelerate and ignite the conflict in the movie. First, Erik is trying to take back his identity and help his people usurp colonialization. This is something that Fanon

advocated. However, the stealing of the mask may also tie Erik into another theory of Fanon's. This notion of romanticizing or returning to an idealized precolonial past is being played out by both Erik Killmonger in postcolonial America and T'Challa in Wakanda. Both men are still haunted and grappling with the past. Living in an urban ghetto, Erik is angry, traumatized, and fighting the continued presence of postcolonialization. Whereas Wakanda is also holding on to a past that no longer exists. The movie explores how these two rivals will fight for their future and survival.

3 How is Orientalism represented in *Black Panther?*

Black Panther celebrates Wakanda's African heritage. This is seen most vividly in the Challenge Day ceremony for the ascendency to the throne. While this is also seen in the opening views of the Gothic/Afrofuturistic city, it is Challenge Day when the tribes wear their full tribal regalia which imparts the strong attachment to Wakandan heritage and legend. Challenge Day is when anyone could challenge the heir-apparent to the throne.

However, this tribal vibe might also be interpreted as giving a Western audience what they want to see and believe when it comes to the exoticism of an African tribal nation. The movie shows a tribesmen who has that typical *National Geographic* cover shot look. He is a prime example of African body stretching, where the African has extended his lower lip over the years by using a wooden plate. The earlobes are also stretched into loops, and this is all topped off by a brightly decorated face dotted with tribal paint. There are tribal gyrations and the stomping of bare feet to the beat of African drums. While the scene feels empowering and is a massive celebration of heritage, I also wondered if this tribal scene was mirroring what a Western world may want to see, reproducing a feeling similar to Orientalism which is a term defined by postcolonial theorist Edward Said. In his book *Orientalism*, Said describes Orientalism in this way:

> Orientalism is a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinctions made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus, a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists,

philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have

accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for

elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts

concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on. (Said

Orientalism 2)

While Said's Orientalism is focused more on Asian or Middle Eastern cultures, the same

fetishism of the exotic could be at play. Michaela Wolf further explains this in "The Third Space

in Postcolonial Representation," in a book chapter entitled, *Changing the Terms*: "Edward Said's

Orientalism, published in 1978, inaugurated a new era in postcolonial studies. His focus on

discourse analysis, in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault 1972), enabled him to unmask the

discriminatory image that Western writings offered of the Orient" (Wolf 131–132). As Said

examined various European representations, Wolf determined that Said, "shows the collusion

between literary texts and Western political domination, which results in the creation of images

of the Orient that separate the spheres of the colonizer and the colonized, and portrays the latter

as backward and passive" (Wolf 131–132). Clearly, *Black Panther* tries to reverse this trend, yet

the fact that a viewer is unsure whether tribal regalia shows celebration and respect, or exotic

fetishism, is one of the many ways that even well-intentioned audiences of different ethnicities

are uncertain how to navigate cultural fusion.

Exoticism becomes problematic when the motivation behind Orientalism signifies

colonization. Wolf's further explanation of Orientalism helps clarify this point. "The West

produced codified knowledge about non-metropolitan areas and cultures, especially those under

colonial domination. Orientalism, in Said's words, is simply 'a kind of Western projection onto

and will to govern over the Orient'" (Wolf 132). This definition could certainly apply to Africa, and the Wakandans used this perception to carry out their anticolonial isolationist strategy.

As shown, the Wakandans mirrored back to the West its perception of a primitive Africa in order to remain "hidden in plain sight." Western airplanes flying over Wakanda were treated to humbly clothed horsemen riding over a barren desert. So other than to hide their city, the Wakandans did not need a hologram since they were so successful in mirroring back to the world what it expected to see of an impoverished nation. This is another example of how the movie reverses binaries. Wakanda, is not your typical impoverished and exotic African nation. It has never been colonized, and in fact, is more advanced than Western nations. Wakanda reverses the East versus West binary, yet uses this Oriental-versus-the-Occident mentality to hide in plain sight. The next section looks at the male versus female binary, and shows additional ways Wakanda uses social conceptions of Orientalism to their advantage.

4 How are gender roles presented in *Black Panther?*

The film addresses gender roles and embodies feminism by creating vibrant female characters. For the most part, the female characters are on par with the male characters. On Challenge Day, we see that there are elder women that head two of the five Wakandan tribes, and Nakia is one of the younger generation of tribal leaders for her tribe (on par with W'Kabi, leader of the border tribe and army). The reason I say women are mostly equal is because of the structure of Challenge Day. Each tribe can challenge for the ascent to the throne. The goal is to make it more fair and less despotic. However, the challenge or confirmation to the ascendency of the throne is based on a physical combat. While T'Challa was physically less endowed than M'Baku, the gigantic leader of the Jabari Tribe, T'Challa was still able to win the battle due to his mental training from his father. He had to leverage not just physical agility, but also outwit his opponent during combat. This is a weakness in that system, because a male, female, elder, or disabled person, who is less physically trained, may not be able to overcome physical limitations for Challenge Day combat. Thus, the country could deprive itself of an otherwise able leader. In other parts of the film, the female warriors hold their own, but at the end, they still lose out to physically stronger male enemies. In some ways, this plays against the trope of the strong female character that can do anything a man can, but we do not know the outcome of a challenge between M'Baku and a woman, because this gender dynamic is not presented in the film. However, while interesting, it is probably done to keep the focus on the postcolonial struggle between Erik and T'Challa.

In all other ways, the film does promote its female characters as intelligent, independent, and respected. For example, King T'Challa's two most trusted advisors are women. The King's special guard, the equivalent of our Secret Service in the U.S., are all female warriors. T'Challa is surrounded by strong females throughout the movie, including within his family. He has respect for his mother and the female elders of the tribe who are valued members of the council. His younger sister, Shuri, heads technology. T'Challa takes Nakia, a spy, and Okoye, his head of warriors, on the critical mission to retrieve the vibranium. He takes no men. Therefore, I believe that the movie is trying to debunk social concepts of femininity and support the concepts presented by feminist pioneer Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir was "among the first feminist thinkers to develop what has now become widely known as a social constructionist portrait of gender, believing that women are not born as women, but are made into women by the pressures and expectations of a patriarchal world" (Oliver 3). In the movie *Black Panther*, the women of Wakanda seem free of many of the West's patriarchal notions of femininity.

One example, is an initial scene where Nakia, one of the top female spies, is in the middle of a mission in Nigeria. She is shown hidden in a truck filled with frightened, dark, and veiled women. This represented human/female trafficking and it was a Wakandan female charged with rescuing them and finding those responsible. This shows that it was not the male needing to come to the rescue of the female. This flips the age-old damsel in distress trope of women waiting to be saved by a man. In addition, it must be pointed out that while Wakanda executed an isolationist strategy, it did try to give some aid to the world by sending in spies. These operatives, however, worked in secret. This is important because Nakia, while she was already out in the world trying to offer support to the oppressed, felt that Wakanda should do more.

In other examples, the movie is playful with some of its female representations. An example is the casino fight scene where T'Challa and the two women attempt to get back the stolen vibranium. In this fight scene (because it's Hollywood and there needs to be bad guys, a car chase, and a fight scene) the women demonstrate some of the most prolific skills. When, they are overpowered and lose their weapons, they become highly resourceful and begin using the symbols of female colonization, such as their hair and high heels, as weapons. The General, Okoye, who has a clean-shaven head, wears a girlie wig in order to fit into today's club culture. She hates it and can't wait to get out of it. However, this works in her favor. Since she looks more traditionally feminine in her wig, she is underestimated during the fight. Trapped at one point, she flings her wig into the face of an opponent to create a distraction and get away. Nakia also gets herself into a jam without her weapon and uses her stiletto heel to spike or gouge her opponent. I found this to be a really funny twist because oftentimes in Hollywood films, directors will use these feminine symbols, long hair or spiked heels, more as sexual weapons of seduction. Whereas in this film they literally weaponize them. It is once again an example of how *Black Panther* tries to reverse common stereotyping.

Later, when the underground capital of Wakanda is captured, the technology control center must be taken back in order to regain control of the Wakandan technologies and weaponry. The film now engages both Orientalist and feminist symbols in an anticolonial and empowering way. The Wakandans, rather than try to overpower and attack the center, send in veiled women. Flipping the scene where the veiled women needed to be rescued, they now use the veiling and stereotypical view of Orientalism to their advantage. The captors, which include the crazed and violent South African Klaue, Erik Killmonger (the young Erik grown up), and their soldiers, completely ignore the veiled women as they come in. The soldiers are staged to

fight and defend, yet they let these veiled women breach the control center with no questions asked. These veiled women, of course, are disguised Wakandan soldiers along with the king's techno-whiz sister. These women are allowed in because they are seen as lowly, harmless veiled women. They are dismissed both for their Orientalism and their gender. In some ways, Shuri, as a female tech guru, hides in plain sight as well, because they do not suspect a woman to be the key to the country's technology.

This attitude towards veiled women is something Leila Ahmed wrote about in her book, *Women and Gender in Islam.* In a chapter called the "Discourse of the Veil," Ahmed declares, "The peculiar practices of Islam with respect to women had always formed part of the Western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam" (Ahmed 149). In both scenes, where the directors use veiled women, they reflect the Western view of the veiled as "other." The veiled women in the movie quickly mirror to a Western audience: oppression (as in the trafficking/rescue scene) and later dismissal and inferiority. Yet, in both situations, the women were smart enough to use their veils strategically. In the sex trafficking scene, the women veiled a young son to hide him in plain sight and save his life. While in the latter scene, the veiled women help take back the capital.

At this point, we begin to see the multiplicity of social identities and intersectionality coming into play within the movie. This complexity of reversing or obliterating rigid binaries or social constructions is one of the movie's biggest strengths. This method of dissecting and magnifying postcolonial themes is what makes the movie so relevant to everyday life.

In another final fun gender flip, we go back to the character of Shuri. In so many movies of the past, the techno-whiz is played by a male. The jocular sidekick of the main action hero is also usually played by a man. An example of this trope is the male character "Q" from the highly

masculinized James Bond sci-fi action series. Q is both the technology guru and comic relief. In the case of *Black Panther*, which balances the female roles and reverses the binaries, that character is embodied in Shuri. Shuri is young, Black, female, and technically astute. She is breaking a number of social stereotypes right there. She is technologically superior to her brother, head of the country's research and development, yet her jokes lighten up the film.

As playful as the sister's role is, the movie does not shy away from a strong feminist undercurrent. Females act as emotional centers for T'Challa, but do not give up everything for a man. Nakia chooses to forego a relationship for her chosen career as a spy. Okoye fights a hardened battle for Wakanda during the civil war and does not back down to her fiancé, W'Kabi. Shuri also fights fearlessly. She multitasks while engaged in hand-to-hand combat, all while giving Everett instructions as he shoots down the interloping planes carrying away the vibranium. The women are in the heat of the battle and hold their own.

The women in this film are shown as strong leaders, both past and present. The elder women are held in respect, are leaders of tribes, and their daughters hold the key to Wakanda's future. In her book, *Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone,* Minna Salami reminds us that, "Throughout African History, women's roles in resistance have been essential yet diminished" (Salami 69). *Black Panther,* instead of diminishing female roles, shows women as agents for change. This is why the ending shot of King T'Challa, flanked by his strong, yet sexy, feminine and powerful females, put a smile on my face. The movie, to the end, does not shy away from the complex role that is woman and takes a stand against what Salami refers to as the Europatriarchal perspective. As Salami suggests:

> The colonizer imposes their language, religion, ideologies, and narrative and uses
> of violent tactics such as detention without trial, collective punishment, mass

execution, forced resettlement, and extreme torture to occupy geographical and

psychological territory. The patriarch uses similar violent tactics to colonize

women's bodies and minds. (Salami 68)

The movie therefore, illuminates serious gender issues, such as sex trafficking, and

successfully reverses standard female tropes by depicting female characters in uncharacteristic

roles. As Salami explains, "while blackness and womanhood are qualities that make me

intrinsically understand oppression and prejudice, they do not automatically put me in the

position of the victim" (Salami 68). The movie reflects this opinion. Other than offering a female

as the next Black Panther, the film attempts to portray a new social construct for women in

Wakanda.

5 How is hybridity portrayed in *Black Panther?*

There is a strong message of cultural hybridity from the opening scenes and throughout the movie. Michael B. Jordan plays the angry and vengeful Erik Killmonger. Erik was born of a Wakandan father and an American mother. To some, his mixed-race made him a hybrid. However, the term "hybrid" in postcolonial terminology is not the same as it is in the sciences. For example, as Wolf explains: "It should be noted that the term *hybrid* has its origins in biology and botany; it became a key term in nineteenth-century positivist discourse, mainly to describe physiological phenomena, and has been reactivated in the twentieth century to describe cultural phenomena" (Wolf 133). Wolf further describes hybridization, as examined by Bhabha, as a subversion of authority in a dialogical situation of colonialism. She states that Bhabha "argues in favor of the *double vision* that individuals, such as migrants or social minorities, positioned at the merging of cultures possess, and stresses the intercultural tension produced by this merging" (Wolf 133–134). Because Wakanda had isolated for so long, you do not hear in the movie whether the inhabitants had intermarried with non-Wakandans. You get the sense of this being a pure race. Killmonger seems to present the first appearance of a person of mixed-race within Wakanda. Erik, therefore, represents one of the first cases of this merging and intercultural tension which will be experienced by Wakanda. T'Challa seems to immediately understand this.

It is this definition of hybrid, or hybridity, that is explored in this thesis. It is the concept of "cultural multiplicity," which is described by Parker as a term which "expresses a sense of continuous cultural change across history that colonialists and some anticolonial movements

might seem to deny" (Parker 297). The film addresses the Wakandans' refusal to change and its anticolonial tactics are about to come under fire. Since the mother is never seen in the movie, we do not know if she is Black or white, only American. This once again presents a unique anti-stereotypical reflection that focuses solely on the relationship between Erik and his father.

This is unlike the findings from the Moynahan Report, referred to in James Berger's essay, "Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison's *Beloved* and the Moynahan Report." This essay puts into context Daniel Patrick Moynihan's, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which Berger characterizes as the last major statement of liberal ideology and policy on race and was essentially the close of the first phase of the U.S. civil rights movement in 1965. Berger believes the report was a culmination of liberal thinking that dated back to radical Black social scientists like E. Franklin Frazier and Ralph Bunche in the 1930s, whose work focused on the traumatization of African-American culture under slavery and continued racial oppression. "Frazier described the history of black family life as a series of wrenching dislocations, the first of which was the nearly total removal from African culture: 'Probably never before in history has a people been so nearly completely stripped of its social heritage as the Negroes who were brought to America" (Berger 412–413). For Frazier, these overarching cultural traumas had specific results that were destructive to Black family life including: "illegitimate births, the abandonment of families by men, households headed by single women, and thus a family structure Frazier classified as matriarchy" (Berger 413). Unfortunately, Frazier's poignant remarks about the stripping of African-American identity, and the ensuing traumas, became overshadowed by a prejudicial criticism of Black matriarchy. Black women were not credited, as they should have been, for remaining strong and steadfast figures for their families.

By contrast in *Black Panther*, women head tribes and play equal roles within Wakanda.

But by centering the narrative on Erik's relationship with his father, the film focuses the analysis on Erik's dislocation from his African or Wakandan heritage. Erik actually was in a unique position of knowing about his African ancestral past, because many African-Americans have had that knowledge completely wiped away. By removing the black versus white element from the comparisons of T'Challa and Erik, the film presents a different perspective that allows the viewer to focus more specifically on the impacts of colonization and oppression.

Erik was "othered" by the Wakandans. He was left behind after the death of his father. All he saw, was the Wakandan airship leaving, and therefore presumed they were responsible. Erik then spent his life training in the U.S. special forces, tattooing his body with every kill, in order to avenge his father's death and take over Wakanda. Erik's goal was to steal Wakanda's vibranium, weaponize it, then arm his Black brothers to take over the world. While Erik becomes a killer, he does have this higher goal in mind. He wants to aid this suffering Black brothers, whereas Wakanda, in order to preserve their lifestyle, only nominally addresses injustices by sending spies into the world.

As Killmonger states in the script: "I know how colonizers think. So we're gonna use their own strategy." Erik, as Killmonger, plans to "arm oppressed people all over the world, so they can finally rise up and kill those in power, and their children and anyone else who takes their side." This actually was a common worry of the colonizer, that the oppressed peoples would rise up against them. Erik finishes his manifesto with this: "The world's gonna start over and this time we're on top." This is all said after T'Challa acknowledges Erik as son of N'Jobu and offers him a chance to find another way, but Erik refuses. Erik blames Wakanda for its isolationist policies and for having the resources to help their oppressed African brothers but refusing to get involved.

T'Challa, however, calls Erik out on this. He tries to tell Erik that he is becoming exactly like his white oppressors, becoming himself the very colonizer he hated. This reflects a pattern of mimicry of the colonizer by the colonized. While Erik hated the colonizer his life had become fixated on them. Perhaps this reflects the sentiment by Alfred Memmi when he wrote his book, *The Colonizer and the Colonized,* "It was not my intention to write about all colonized people. I was Tunisian, therefore colonized. I discovered that few aspects of my life and my personality were untouched by this fact" (Memmi viii). Erik felt betrayed by not only his American oppressors, but also by Wakanda. Erik could see no other way but revenge.

In looking at Killmonger's statement, "The world's gonna start over and this time we're on top," it mirrors two different aspects of Fanon's theories. First, that "the colonizers taught native peoples to believe in and internalize the colonizers' racist sense of native people's inferiority," and "because colonialism was violent, Fanon believed that it would take violence to overthrow colonialism" (Parker 291). Therefore Erik, chose to be violent, which is also a form of mimicry of the colonizer. Having had his identity stripped away, he comes from a state of inferiority as defined by Fanon, "Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face-to-face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country" (Fanon 18). Erik feels oppressed in post-slavery America and alienated from his African/Wakandan heritage.

This alienation contributes to Erik's fixation on revenge and makes him unable to explore what Homi Bhabha describes as, "The Third Space." Bhabha explains the "Third Space" in his interview with Jonathan Rutherford: "All forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original

movements from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge" (qtd. in Rutherford 211). The experience of oppression and trauma has a polarizing effect on Erik. He seems unable to allow new positions of hybridity to emerge.

We see throughout the movie that T'Challa has entered this Third Space or place of questioning and unknowing. Whether it is his questioning the decision to remain peace-loving isolationists, or determining whether he is ready to enter into a marital relationship, T'Challa resists pressures from his family and constituents, and allows himself to remain within this space of ambiguity in order to form a new reality. In the Third Space, T'Challa explores whether there is another way. T'Challa, even after becoming king, remains in this Third Space. Others around him consider this ambiguity to be weakness or indecision, but T'Challa is seeking answers—his own answers. He is reaching for solutions and options that might be beyond the current known. This reflects the continued definition by Bhabha of his Third Space. As Bhabha elaborates, "This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (qtd. in Rutherford 211). T'Challa is exploring the possibility of new structures.

T'Challa listens to the passed-down histories, even respects them, but he also hears the changing views of his people and sees the world changing around them. He questions his role as King and whether he is ready to rule, mainly because he thinks there may be another way, but he doesn't yet know what that it is. Rutherford, in his interview with Bhabha asks this question: "I can see how this enables us to elude a politics of polarity and a cultural binarism, but would you call this 'third space' an identity as such?" (Rutherford 211). Bhabha answered the question with this: "The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new, and

unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (qtd. in Rutherford 211). Therefore we see that the outcomes from consciously entering the Third Space are highly innovative. In looking at Bhabha's answer in more detail, we see that this is a pattern for the postcolonial evaluation in this movie. By stripping away the social binaries, *Black Panther* enables us to see the issues of a politics of polarity more clearly. The movie calls out cultural binarism of black versus white, East versus West, male versus female, or even Wakanda versus the rest of the world, and it is in the character of T'Challa that we meet this new version of hybridity.

Through the symbolization of the special heart-shaped herb, T'Challa as Black Panther, is able to have a direct dialog with the Kings of the past. These visions are particularly Gothic and haunting. He receives the past-down wisdom, but he is not sure now how much of it remains relevant in a changing world. Wakanda needs to evolve. Its people want to evolve, at least some of them. T'Challa, embraces the process of Bhabha's Third Space in a big way in the movie, while Erik Killmonger holds on to Fanon's romanticizing notion of returning to a precolonial past.

6 How does *Black Panther* approach the impacts of ancestry, identity, and heritage?

During the opening Challenge Day ceremony when T'Challa is on the brink of yielding or death, his mother yells out: "T'Challa . . . Show them who you are!" This is the journey we go on with T'Challa as he questions his role as King and his readiness to a good husband. T'Challa questions his loyalty to the ancestors and how to assimilate the passed-on knowledge, while also hearing the voices and sentiments of his people.

T'Challa wants to be faithful to his ancestors and his heritage. He also wants to be a good leader and understand alternate ways to engage with the world. He is torn between looking to the past to protect his people and moving forward into a new unknown reality. T'Challa does not move quickly into action because he knows once they choose to become known in the world there is no going back. This is what T'Challa grapples with in his Third Space. T'Challa seeks not only to right the wrongs of his father, but become his own man with his own vision, direction, and leadership. He realizes he must reach for something new and different—that which comes from the Third Space. T'Challa strives for this both on a personal as well as national level.

T'Challa enters and remains within the interstices, or space of unknowing, implied by Bhabha's Third Space. He dwells in this limbo before determining a course of action. This is not the case with Erik Killmonger. Killmonger has spent his life trying to retrieve his identity, but

hatred, resentment, betrayal, and revenge override the process of Erik entering a Third Space. He has set his course of action.

Why is T'Challa better able to navigate into the Third Space and reflect on his next course of action? Erik and T'Challa come from two different backgrounds. T'Challa comes from a country with strong national pride and unity. The Wakandan heritage was passed down through storytelling from generation to generation, teaching their youth their accepted values, beliefs, and principles. One of these core values was not to use weapons to attack but only to defend. It is their way, a peaceful way. Of course, it was a peaceful way backed by weapons and economic stability. This was not the case with Erik's seclusion in the urban ghetto. Erik's training regarding Wakandan tradition was cut short, and therefore Erik became a product of the Oakland projects and American military.

Because of T'Challa's upbringing, his searching reinforces what Susan Gilson Miller summarizes in her Afterword on *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, where she describes the sentiments of Jean-Paul Sartre and Memmi: "Neither had lost faith in human goodness, and both wanted to create new forms of social organization that would allow for the rekindling of the human spirit. They saw in the end of colonialism the promise that a more rational moment was at hand, in which, as Memmi says, people would be 'whole and free'" (Memmi 169). In T'Challa, we see a focus on human goodness. This was foreshadowed by his father's words that T'Challa was "a good man with a good heart," but followed by the admonition of how difficult it was for a good man to be king.

Erik did not have this same approach because as Salami discusses, part of being whole and free is the freeing of the mind as well: "Decolonization of the mind should cause a sense of unity and calm in the mind. It is not removing thought patterns by force, but instead gently

inserting new insights, which eventually reshuffle and do away with harmful thoughts" (Salami 71). There is nothing gentle about Erik's approach to using violence to force others to succumb to his views.

Part of this decolonization process, Salami continues, includes how naming and language have indeed shaped much of the debate about decolonization to date. For this, she refers to the book, *Decolonising the Mind*, by Kenyan novelist and postcolonial theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Thiong'o argued that the suppression of African languages is the root cause of mental colonization, "The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (Salami 61). In the case of Wakanda, the history of its people, how vibranium came to the land, the fighting amongst the five tribes, and how they chose their leaders, were all passed down through oral storytelling. Erik, as a child had been captivated by this through his father's storytelling.

Just as the movie *Black Panther* eliminates the black versus white binary between the main characters of Erik and T'Challa, I am going to do the same by comparing the storytelling tradition of Wakanda with that of the Irish. Like many cultures, the Irish were colonized. Harsh taxation laws by the British led to starvation during the potato famine. Once they moved to America, they again faced harsh prejudice, from cartoons that depicted them as apes to Help Wanted ads that said: Irish need not apply. The Irish faced oppression. They faced indentured servitude to pay off their passage. While their plight was different, there is a common theme of storytelling. Like many diasporic people, the Irish are known for their folklore and most especially, their fairy tales. These tales could be passed down orally from generation to generation, helping to create a lasting bond with their ancestors, and unity in the face of oppression. This bond had been created between Erik and Wakanda by his father's storytelling,

which made the sting of his father being killed, and then left by the Wakandans, even more traumatic.

Therefore, when T'Challa tries to show recognition of Erik by using Killmonger's Wakandan name, "N'Jadaka, son of N'Jobu," Erik does not realize that this naming is a sign of mutual language, acceptance, and respect from T'Challa. Erik has not gone through a process of decolonization of the mind and is still living in, and reacting to, the oppressor. Erik is so consumed with hate that he continues to pursue his violent takeover. Erik is disconnected from his African heritage and is set upon revenge versus moving into a more reflective Third Space.

An additional binary introduced into the film is that of the traditionalist versus innovator. In a video interview called, "Anatomy of a Scene/*Black Panther*," writer/director Ryan Coogler breaks down his characters in the movie as traditionalists or innovators. Using this reference we can see that Nakia would be seen as an innovator, who wants to break from the strict tradition of isolation. Whereas her friend Okoye, General of the Dora Milaje, as part of her temperament and/or position, is highly traditional. Okoye wants to serve her country, Nakia wants to save it. Both women take active roles in their country's service. With this approach, the film once again breaks out of the typical political binaries of liberal/conservative, or young versus old.

Introducing a traditionalist versus innovator theme also signals the film's disposition towards a creative Third Space. For example, a traditionalist view is often equated with isolationism. This is depicted through the Jabari tribe. The Jabari tribe of Wakanda shunned the technological advancements and modernism of the country. They retreated to the mountains to remain in a non-changing, non-technical world. This not only kept them focused on the past, but further isolated them within Wakanda. Wakanda's protectionist policies created a similar situation for them within the world at large. Wakanda remained unchanged as the world around

them evolves. The Wakandans believed they were insulated, but Erik Killmonger becomes the catalyst that forces the tensions between the traditionalists and the innovators within Wakanda.

As T'Challa struggles between his gaze to the past and wanting to uphold tradition, he is not able to dwell long enough within the Third Space to come to resolution with what the new way for Wakanda might be. The crisis is accelerated by Erik Killmonger. This creates an oppositional political and ideological binary within the country that leads to civil war. What does Bhabha think about this? In his interview with Rutherford, Bhabha referred to his piece, "Commitment to Theory," an essay included in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha said that, "In any particular political struggle, new sites are always being opened up, and if you keep referring those new sites to old principles, then you are not actually able to participate in them fully and productively and creatively" (qtd. in Rutherford 216). The Jabari tribe preferred lifestyles of the past, however, when it came to political crossroads, their leader M'Baku was evaluative and open to different options that might be best for his people. Erik and segments of Wakanda, when focused solely on old principles, were not able to participate fully, productively, or creatively in developing new means of engagement within an ever-evolving world.

By minimizing the black versus white, the movie uses the traditionalist/innovator binary to address the "hybridization" of ideology and explores the processes of cultural change and transformation as envisioned by Bhabha. This is mostly achieved through the character of T'Challa as he moves through the process of the Third Space to create a new form of cultural hybridity, something new and unrecognizable. As this binary approach in the film exposes the various postcolonial themes, it next leads to an examination of the consequences and impact of postcolonialism as it plays out in all levels of relationships including friends, families, marriages, and the world at large.

7   How do postcolonial themes in *Black Panther* impact the characters' and the country's relationships?

7.1   How do postcolonial themes in Black Panther *impact relationships?*

To review how these postcolonial themes impact the characters and their relationships, I would like to add the perspective of Adélékè Adéèkó from his paper, "Postcolonial Critique in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther.*" While Adéèkó immediately acknowledges that he does not propose that Ryan Coogler's Wakanda is a literal postcolonial state, since no foreign country ever owned or governed the territory, he frames postcoloniality within the context of the movie to be a broad term that captures "a tendency of organizing and interpreting relations among peoples and nations" (Adéèkó 137). That is the goal of this section, to see how the movie continues to use social binaries to examine effects of postcolonialism as represented through the characters and their interactions with others.

Because the dynamic between Erik and T'Challa is not based on black versus white, it complicates and magnifies the colonized versus colonizer model. It allows us to view the countereffects of ancestry, heritage, and identity in the aftermath of colonization. However, *Black Panther* does not back away from black versus white. Using the secondary characters, the film continues to illuminate essentialist behavior to expose issues such as reverse racism. I will look at this now, since some of the principal complaints, or critiques, of the film seem to center around the depiction of the white character: Everett K. Ross.

7.2 *White versus Black: What does Agent Everett K. Ross represent in* Black Panther?

The binaries of white versus black are addressed in *Black Panther* most notably through the middle-aged white guy, CIA Agent Everett K. Ross. This character seems to be a lightning rod for any negative criticism about a mostly well-received movie. Manohla Dargis, in a *New York Times* review of the film, refers to the character of Agent Ross as "an international lawman in the person of a friendly CIA agent (the customarily cuddly Martin Freeman), whose good-guy status is just one reminder that *Black Panther* adheres to at least some dubious Hollywood conventions." But I think treating Freeman's character as a light-weight cuddly token of American goodness misses some important postcolonial points, because as usual, the film flips some of the usual binaries. For example, Agent Ross takes his own share of racial jabbing, with T'Challa's sister Shuri leading the way. In Korea, Agent Ross risks his life to save Nakia and becomes mortally wounded, dying from a spinal injury. T'Challa chooses to let the villain Klaue go to take his friend Everett back to Wakanda for treatment. Upon first seeing Everett, Shuri says, "Great, another white boy for us to fix." Later, in another nod by the movie to postcolonialism, she outright calls him "Colonizer," to which he responds, "Colonizer? No, my name is Everett." This interplay is both funny and telling. The agent's response with just his first name gives him a personal identity, not one of a U.S. operative or white-person oppressor. He doesn't respond with his rank or title. He is an individual versus a homogenous stereotype.

Gianna M. Eckhardt in her article, "Thrills, Postcolonial Discourse, and Blacktopia," also critiques this white character: "Amidst the valorization of a movie which celebrates black power, however, there were also discordant notes, and criticisms, that it did not go far enough. Critics

such as pop culture commentator Leslie Lee (2018) have suggested that the film is by and for white people, and its politics are fundamentally conservative" (Eckhardt 5). Eckhardt herself believes that one specific critique that does resonate is about the CIA: that despite the organization's known conservative and oft pro-colonizer politics, the movie depicts the CIA as a benevolent organization, in the form of agent Ross. Eckhardt argues, "The CIA being the good guys does not ring true in a movie which is so overt in articulating the harm the United States has done as a global power throughout the world via its institutions such as the military. CIA agent Ross, who was involved in trying to stop Klaue from getting hold of vibranium, is depicted as bumbling in the film, not as a dominant character" (Eckhardt 7). While Agent Ross may be seen as more of a secondary character, his role is still pivotal despite his casual and lightweight demeanor. Agent Ross, in fact, plays an important postcolonial role within the movie by providing a character who reverses the white versus black binary. His character makes a statement about essentialism and polarity. In addition, the CIA and the U.S. military are criticized in multiple ways throughout the film, not only through the character of Erik Killmonger, but also via Agent Ross.

For example, the sentiment that the movie is pandering to white conservatives, or portraying the CIA as the good guys, is easily refuted as the movie throughout punctures that veil. The entire being and nickname of "Killmonger" is an indictment against the U.S. military. Killmonger joined the U.S. army in order to learn how to kill, so he could enact his revenge on Wakanda and Black oppressors. Killmonger tells T'Challa, "I killed in America, Afghanistan, Iraq. I took life from my own brothers and sisters right here on the continent. And all this death, just so I can kill you." Those words are a pretty blatant indictment of U.S. military actions.

Agent Ross' character, as ex-military and a CIA agent, offers insights and criticism of these organizations. It is Agent Ross who continually educates and describes the various subversive tactics and measures that Erik was taught as part of the elite forces. "That's what he was trained to do. His unit used to work with the CIA to destabilize foreign countries. They would always strike at transitions of power ... like an election year or the death of a monarch. You get control of government, the military." Shuri and T'Challa ponder Everett's words and begin to understand the impact of Killmonger's actions. The character of Everett, therefore, is not just explaining, he is indicting.

I also do not see in the movie that Agent Ross is bumbling. There is some comic relief in Everett's character. This is played out with the badgering he gets from the young hip techno-savvy Shuri with her reversed racial slurs of white-boy and Colonizer towards Everett. However, we also get to see that relationship grow. Another binary that gets addressed with this middle-aged white guy character is the discrimination of agism, or the binary of young versus old. Shuri is quite respectful to her elders within Wakanda, but not so much to the outsider Everett. There continues to be comical, yet heartwarming, interchanges between these two characters, which yes, may be vintage Hollywood, but nevertheless, offers some much-needed comic relief from the intensity of this postcolonial examination.

Despite his age, Everett shows that he is honorable, knowledgeable, and capable. Agent Ross has shown to T'Challa that he can be trusted. He has kept Wakanda's secret and been an ally to T'Challa. With his been-there-done-that/seen-it-all attitude, Agent Ross displays a calm and cool under fire. Whether it is the impending weapons deal with the bad guys in the underground casino in Korea; the throwing of his body in front of Nakia to save her from fatal harm; the knowing when to keep quiet when faced with the gigantic M'Baku of the N'Jobu tribe;

or the shooting down of enemy aircraft stealing the vibranium as he is about to lose battery power, Agent Ross holds his own and wins over the trust and confidence of Shuri. (She even builds a plane "American style" just for him.) While the funny, white everyman may be Hollywood's attempt to widen its audience and sell more tickets, the film does not represent this character as merely bumbling. The collaboration between Agent Ross and Shuri shows a definite arc in the relationship and is there for a reason. Therefore, there are additional meanings behind the character of the white agent Ross that the films' writers explore.

There is an arc in the relationship between Shuri and Everett as a means of addressing the cultural binary of black versus white. Just as Salami addresses that her blackness and womanhood do not automatically make her a victim, she also maintains that "every white- and male-born person is not automatically an oppressor" (Salami 2). The writers of *Black Panther* highlight this with the character of Agent Ross. Ross has knowledge and experience in areas that the Wakandans, through their isolation, do not possess. As an ex-air force pilot, he displays skill and valor. His operational training gives him perspective in high-pressure situations. Agent Ross does not immediately react to Shuri's slurs. He observes them, then ignores them as he tries to work with her. Their ability to work together and find commonality provides an avenue to advance Wakanda's postcolonial reformation. Everett, also in some ways, becomes a father figure to T'Challa. Everett offers T'Challa guidance, information, advice, and support. Everett is shown in the audience during the final scene of the movie listening to T'Challa's "Coming Out of the Shadows" speech to the U.N. He has the proud look of a father who has just seen his son come into his own. While some may view this as the white oppressor being presented as more intelligent and reinforcing dominance, the movie does not seem to take this tact. Since the definition of postcolonialism looks into characteristics of organizations and relationships, the

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relationship between Shuri and Agent Ross helps defuse the white-versus-black, colonized-versus-colonizer, and young-versus-old binaries, to demonstrate the development of trust that offers us a glimpse of Bhabha's hybridity and the Third Space, or what T'Challa refers to as "another way."

There are other clashes between *Black Panther* characters and agent Ross that also provide us some postcolonial education. For example, Agent Ross does not first resort to violence as Erik Killmonger does. In fact, he often tries to avoid conflict by communicating or negotiating, or in other words, through diplomacy. Diplomacy seems lost in today's polarized world of black versus white, right versus wrong, my way and no other. Agent Ross tries to teach this skill to the hard-right traditionalist in the movie, Okoye. This fierce warrior refuses to speak English in front of Ross when they first meet. She presents a condescending and patronizing affront to Ross by excluding him from the conversation through language. It is a reversal and mimicry of the colonizer. The scene depicts how bilingual people will speak their own language in front of others who do not understand in order to be exclusionary and hide what they are really saying. Agent Ross calls this out immediately in *Black Panther* asking what Okoye is talking about and whether she speaks English. He knows if she does speak English then she is purposely excluding him. Therefore, in this example, the comedic, but knowing character of Ross, helps to highlight this reverse discrimination. This so-called lightweight character once again is used to reverse a binary in the film.

Therefore, while the lighter nature of the dialog and the mild manner of Agent Ross, as played by Freeman, may have a comedic feel, it does not mean that the messages behind this character are lightweight. When T'Challa stops speaking to Okoye in their native tongue and answers her in English to bring Agent Ross into the conversation, Agent Ross turns to Okoye

and says, "You see that. It's called diplomacy. You're welcome." In that statement, Ross acknowledges that he understood exactly what she was doing. Diplomacy seems to be a skill that is undervalued today. Ross is trying to work with Wakanda and offer his insights and experience, not as an oppressor, but an ally. This also shows how once white versus black gets introduced into the movie, that binary changes people's viewpoints. A white mentor, no matter how benevolent or "good" that white person may be, may still be seen as white dominance and pandering. In that scene, what I saw was Okoye trying to create an enemy from someone who did not need to be her enemy. She made assumptions based on her understanding of whites. It is highly essentializing and polarizing to infer that all whites are oppressors and can shut out people who want to be engaged. Because Agent Ross is white, some will immediately dismiss him without looking beyond to see if there is any meaning to his role.

From what we see, Agent Ross is an upstanding character and compassionate human being. In many ways, this white character is reminiscent of Toni Morrison's portrayal of Amy Denver in *Beloved.* In Morrison's classic novel, there are a number of white people who show various modes of racism. However, Amy Denver, also a secondary character, is white and saves the life of the protagonist Sethe, who is escaping from slavery. Although a minor character, Amy plays a pivotal role, for without Amy saving Sethe, there is no story to be passed on.

Just as Shuri immediately calls Agent Ross "white boy" and "colonizer," the runaway slave Sethe describes her first impressions of Amy as "the raggediest-looking trash you ever saw" (Morrison, *Beloved* 38). Essentially, Sethe calls Amy white trash. Sethe had learned from her elders, then through her own experiences, not to trust "whitepeople." However, all that changes as Amy, a runaway indentured servant, risks her own life and freedom, to offer tender care to treat Sethe's wounds from a whipping. Sethe is pregnant. Amy finds spider webs to fill

the gaping wounds and rubs Sethe's swollen and numbed feet back to life. Amy then takes additional precious time to help birth Sethe's baby daughter. Had Amy been caught, under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, she could have been punished or imprisoned. Instead, she saves Sethe's life and encourages her. She tells Sethe that she can indeed make it through. This does not go unnoticed by Sethe, who then names her daughter Denver, after the compassionate white woman who saved her life. This is similar to Agent Ross, who took risks to keep Wakanda's secret and to save Nakia's life and encourages T'Challa.

In her essay, "To Be Loved: Amy Denver and Human Need: Bridges to Understanding in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Nicole M. Coonradt believes that the compassionate white woman of Amy Denver is used in the novel as a prophetic healer and one of great importance as a bridge to deeper understanding in *Beloved.* Coonradt states that in the character of Amy Denver, "Morrison reveals her essential function as a 'bridge' between black and white, racism and understanding, destruction and renewal for she too proves 'beloved' if one identifies the meaning of her name" (Coonradt 169). The name Amy in Latin, means beloved, so this is no mere coincidence. Coonradt also states that Morrison "does not condemn all whites, neither does she exonerate all blacks." Morrison, like Salami, tries to break free of essentialism through the character of Amy Denver.

The same could be said for the character of Agent Ross in *Black Panther*. Agent Ross is a secondary character who provides a potential bridge for race relations. His character provides an anti-essentialist example, demonstrating the pitfalls of white versus black polarization. In the novel *Beloved*, the members of the Black community turned their backs on Sethe and therefore are taken to task by Morrison. *Black Panther* takes Wakanda to task for its isolationist policies and turning their backs, not just on Erik, but the rest of Black communal suffering in a

postcolonial world. Reinforced by these examples, I believe there is much more to the character of Agent Ross than just a lovable white character that panders to a white and conservative audience. Perhaps the writers were not just trying to sell more tickets, but wanted to create a similar bridge. After all, the name Everett means brave.

7.3   Why does Erik Killmonger have to die?

In *Black Panther*, the main protagonist/antagonist story line removes the black versus white antagonism. It is the relational dynamic between Erik and T'Challa that is the main source of drama in the film. As noted, Erik, did not have the benefit of learning the Wakandan way. Erik was raised in the U.S. and dealing with a different postcolonial narrative. Erik was also suffering from the dual trauma of losing his father and living in the urban projects of postcolonial America. This drives Erik to seek revenge on Wakanda. Erik Killmonger was waging war against Wakanda, in part, to avenge his father's death. In *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon,* John Kerrigan details:

> It is an observable fact of societies which permit vendetta, as well as a painful
> feature of much tragedy, that, until revenge is exacted, those close to an injured or
> murdered person feel the guilt or shame of betrayal. Why were the victims not
> protected by their loved ones? Was the neglect which allowed the attack even a
> form of complicity? Such anxieties mean that the assaulted can find it easier to
> forgive than those expected to revenge, while the latter persuade themselves that
> the retribution which they exact is taken in the name of the wronged. (Kerrigan 7)

With Kerrigan we have a powerful statement about forgiveness, or the lack of it, and how a trauma, such as the murder of a loved one, can have a profound influence. We have three characters in *Black Panther* whose fathers have been murdered: Erik, T'Challa, and W'Kabi, head of border security forces in Wakanda. W'Kabi, wants to avenge his father's death by killing the one responsible: Klaue. T'Challa prevents W'Kabi from going with them to Korea to steal back the vibranium from Klaue. When T'Challa abandons the pursuit of Klaue to save Everett, all W'Kabi sees is weakness. He blames T'Challa.

W'Kabi, is unhappy with T'Challa for not taking him along and interfering with his quest for revenge. W'Kabi also does not enter a Third Space. He perceives T'Challa's ambiguity of the Third Space as indecisive and weak. He therefore ends up throwing his army behind Killmonger and waging war against his own country. This is ironic because Killmonger's father, in essence, was responsible for his own father's death. But since Killmonger delivers Klaue's body to W'Kabi, he sides with Erik. While Killmonger and W'Kabi persuade themselves that the retribution is taken on in the name of the wronged, Kerrigan warns that, "Revenge and retributive justice are hard to disentangle" (Kerrigan 23). Revenge can lead to more revenge, and as shown in Wakanda, it leads to civil war as W'Kabi abandon's the protection of his country to abet the attacker.

The layers of disenfranchisement on the side of Killmonger are many. He was a product of the projects, and while he was provided some narrative from his father on Wakanda, that heritage, or storytelling connection, was cut short. Erik's new narrative was framed in postcolonial America. The movie depicts this new narrative in the form of rap music, as shown in the opening and closing scenes in Oakland. In "Rap Music and its Violent Progeny: America's Culture of Violence in Context," Jeanita W. Richardson and Kim A. Scott reflect, "Rap music is

America's child, born of the inadequate remediation of social inequities. As offensive as some lyrics may be, they speak the 'truth' as constructed by an isolated Black urban youth culture in a land of plenty" (Richardson and Scott 188). For young Erik, growing up in the projects of Oakland, California without his father, he saw a world that offered him little social justice. His new narrative and sense of belonging no longer came from the passed-down storytelling from his father, but from his shared experience with others as represented in the rap music narrative. This provides identity and connection with the environment that surrounded him.

Referencing Fanon, we recall that Fanon believes that the colonizer imprints a sense of inferiority upon the colonized, and that revolt is the only way the colonized can take back from the colonizer; freedom cannot be handed to them from the colonizer, as this only reinforces their superiority. Killmonger not only wants to exact revenge for his father's death but for the enslavement and suffering of his people throughout the world. Killmonger indicts T'Challa and Wakanda's isolationist ways when he declares: "There's about two 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." Many countries, or peoples, did not have the tools to resist the white oppressor. Therefore Killmonger's vendetta is not only personal, but a means for taking on the social injustices of his people. However, the movie does not support this concept of Fanon to stage a violent revolt in order to seize back identity from the colonizer. Instead, the movie focuses more on searching for a new way, or a quest for what Bhabha calls the Third Space.

Killmonger's way is not the Wakandan way. Using Fanon's theory, Erik mimics the white colonizer because, while he hates them, he aspires to be them. As Eckhardt states, "Ultimately, Killmonger is not so much an antagonist to T'Challa as a product of the colonialist regime in which he grew up" (Eckhardt 7). T'Challa acknowledges that Killmonger is a

"monster" of their own making. T'Challa, through his reflections within the Third Space, seems to understand the importance of naming. He sees Erik the child, as a cousin and fellow Wakandan, even though he is of mixed-race. T'Challa takes responsibility for Wakanda's part in creating Killmonger and by calling Erik by his Wakandan name, wants to offer a bridge.

As seen at the end of the movie, T'Challa is able to overcome Killmonger and Erik is mortally wounded. Upon his own initiative, T'Challa takes Erik to finally see the Wakandan sunset. They sit peacefully overlooking the Wakandan landscape, and once again, T'Challa says to Erik, "Maybe we can still heal you?" So then why does Erik choose to die? Was it because Killmonger was so consumed with hate, he couldn't get past it? Is Erik's suicide similar to Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, where she chooses suicide "when her life-projects seem to have failed" (Kerrigan 346). When T'Challa says, "maybe we can still heal you," T'Challa is not just referring to Erik's physical wounds, but emotional as well, by offering him acceptance and a second chance.

In this scene, Erik seems to revert to that of a wounded child when he laments to T'Challa how silly it was for a kid from Oakland to be "running around believing in fairy tales." This reinforces the notion that Erik was still trying to heal from his childhood trauma and was deeply affected by the narrative of storytelling by his father. The use of the term "fairy tale" also reminds us of the strong connection between oral storytelling and ancestry, heritage, and identity.

Just as you think in that serene setting Erik might finally accept T'Challa's offer to heal him, Erik sarcastically asks, "Why so you can just lock me up? Nah. Just bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships, 'cause they knew death was better than bondage." He then plunges a knife into himself and commits suicide. A Shakespearian tragedy to say the

least. Erik's choosing to die shows the complication and difficulty in trying to move forward in a world still haunted by the ravages of colonialism and postcolonialism.

Erik could see no other way. His narrative and experiences in postcolonial America most likely included seeing the Black males around him being incarcerated, along with hopelessness, and continual impoverishment. The words "child protective services" blares out in one of the rap songs as T'Challa and his reform team return to Oakland. Erik's final words are also a memorial to the ravages of American slavery and the millions of deaths from the Middle Passage, or ocean journey from Africa to America. Erik makes an association to the Middle Passage when he references those ancestors who jumped from the ships versus face bondage in the U.S.

This statement provides us with yet another reference to Morrison whose title character Beloved was meant to represent the haunting of slavery on the world and give voice to the millions who lost their lives in the Middle Passage. As Morrison herself describes these hauntings of the past, she believed they were still with us, "When finally I understood the nature of a haunting—how it is both what we yearn for and what we fear, I was able to see the traces of a ghostly presence, the residue of a repressed past in certain concrete but also allusive detail" (Morrison, *Self-Regard*, 284). Erik's deep yearning for connection to the precolonial past did not allow him to accept T'Challa's offer to find another way. Erik's inability to enter a Third Space and his choice for death perhaps reflect the words of Sartre, "When a people have no choice but how it will die; when a people has received from its oppressors only the gift of despair, what does it have to lose?" (Memmi xxix). Erik's trauma and anger from living amidst postcolonial oppression, as well as his disconnection from his African ancestry, must have made him feel his only choice was death.

8 Conclusion: What can we still learn from *Black Panther*?

Black Panther reverses the normative cultural binaries to help isolate, examine, and magnify postcolonial issues. In reviewing the treatment of postcolonial themes in the movie such as Gothicism, anticolonialism, Orientalism, gender roles, hybridity, and ancestry, we can see how continued postcolonial trauma impacts the beliefs and behaviors of the characters in the film. Issues of trauma, identity, heritage, ancestry and revenge, create significant impact on the characters' relationships and their ability to navigate change. Those haunted by traumas of the past are often unable to move forward. Those motivated by anger, hatred, retribution, or revenge, can resort to violence, and mimic the very oppressor whom they hate.

While Fanon suggests that the colonized must seize back their independence from the colonizer, he also warns about romanticizing a precolonial past which can no longer be obtained. As Jessica Langer states in her book, *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction,* "Despite the calls of the nativists, there is no perfect or pure past to which it is possible to go back to. This interaction is not the source of trauma. Rather, it is the *forced* collapse of boundaries by a strong and violent power, and the *deliberate* erasure of indigenous culture in the form of colonialism, that creates a torn and ragged place at the site of transgression" (Langer 110). Erik represents that site of transgression for the isolated Wakandans which collapses their carefully constructed boundaries.

In today's world, we see the lasting effects, or hauntings, of a colonial past. Erik Killmonger, stripped of his identity, reverted to violence as a strategy to seize back his identity. Erik's dual trauma of his father's death and being raised in a postcolonial American urban ghetto

made him unable to imagine a different way. Erik wanted to go back to a precolonial past, and some Wakandans as well wanted to stay in their anticolonial bubble. Both worlds were changing. Those characters who can accept change, innovate, or enter and emerge from a Third Space, are better able to navigate change, move forward, and create new forms of cultural hybridity as expressed by Bhabha.

As post-slavery America still deals with Black issues and there are calls for reparations, this postcolonial examination explored in *Black Panther* remains relevant today. By reversing or shattering social binaries, *Black Panther* offers its audience a novel approach to assessing and exploring new understandings, ideas, and concepts about how we heal as a humanity and move forward in an ever-evolving world, or Third Space.

Through the character of T'Challa, we see how the new King emerges from the interstitial Third Space of unknowing to present a new future for Wakanda—one that preserves its heritage and peaceful ways, but provides innovative thinking to create a new interactive beginning. The new Wakanda makes reparations for its past mistakes by no longer turning its back on the world's suffering. Without violence, T'Challa creates a "new way," by innovatively bringing their resources to the world.

The film also shows, through its secondary characters, how to successfully navigate change within relationships. T'Challa's innovative role for Wakanda also incorporates a new role for Nakia to follow her life calling, without having to completely give up a relationship. Agent Ross and Shuri are able to overcome essentialism to focus on a common cause. The innovator versus traditionalist relationship of W'Kabi and Okoye also gets resolved within the new Wakanda, where their love of country and each other becomes stronger motivation than the need for revenge.

It is only in the character of Erik Killmonger that we see a tragic ending with no resolution. We see a character who is so steeped in hatred and revenge that he is unable to move forward even when offered a chance to participate and heal. Erik's trauma and bitterness do not allow him the ability to move into the ambiguity of a Third Space. Through the tragic death of Erik, we see how the trauma of colonialism still haunts. The movie celebrates ancestry, but also calls for innovative change. Going back to a romanticized precolonial past does not take into account a changed world as it exists today. As Shuri pointed out, the world is constantly evolving and those who do not continuously improve, or innovate, can get stuck in the past or left behind. *Black Panther* shatters the binaries and provides us lessons on how to navigate change and enter into Bhabha's Third Space to create and reconstruct a new "nationness, community interest, and "cultural value" (Bhabha 2). The movie celebrates ancestry and explores ways to embrace culture heritage while constantly navigating cultural hybridity and change.

Notes

1. The words "Third World" are used in the film, and therefore will be used here.

2. Supan, Alexander. *Die territoriale Entwicklung der Euroaischen Kolonien*. Gotha, 1906, p. 254.

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