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Black Digital Spaces: Theorizing Resistance in the Wake of Racist Technology

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In the wake of major technological advancement, social media has increasingly become a communal space of daily congregation, particularly for Black people. This paper specifically explores how the Black Diaspora navigates these spaces at a complex intersection of social media and transnational Black histories. I draw from critical Internet studies, Black Diaspora studies, Black feminisms, and media studies to investigate how new technology allows Black folk to engage in conversations about our identity, community, and resistance. Employing a critical ethnographic approach, this paper analyzes online discourse within the Black community about Marvel's *Black Panther* (2018). This analysis emphasizes the parallels between maroon communities and digital Black spaces, as they both serve as a transnational and multi-ethnic communities that challenge oppressive systems.

Connecting the Black Diaspora — in history and online

In her 2019 book *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, Ruha Benjamin coins the term *New Jim Code*, a phenomenon in a new era of technology. Inspired by Michelle Alexander's (2010) *The New Jim Crow*, Benjamin argues that new technology, while appearing to be progressive, reflects and reproduces inequity. One way this kind of inequity manifests is in search engine algorithms. In Google's early days, Black women and other women of color were commercialized and sexualized through search engines' top search results (Noble 2018). Along with search engine algorithms, users on social media sites and websites bring their biases and bigotry that impact the Black community in various ways (Lawson 2018; Bailey 2021).

Despite the apparent evils of digital technology, Black people still find many ways to use these tools to our benefit. From advocating for racial and social justice (McIlwain 2019; Florini 2019; Jackson et al 2020; Collins and Bilge 2020; Clark and Mohammed

2023) to finding everyday joy and community with other Black people around shared interests (Williams and Gonlin 2017; Brock, Jr. 2012; Brock, Jr. 2020; Steele 2021), the digital space in an additional place where Black people can find community with each other. This type of community formation is not unique to transnational Black communities and can be found throughout history, specifically in maroon communities.

Maroon societies in the Americas emerged out of enslaved Africans' desire to escape a colonial slave system. These communities represented courageous defiance of white authority, proof of a slave consciousness that was not bound to their oppressors (Price 1973), and contained an inner logic that transcended spatial and linguistic barriers (Thompson 2006). Despite the diversity in size, purpose, and location, maroon communities shared several characteristics around identity, community, and resistance. This inner logic amid oppressive systems has carried on throughout Black history, showing up from the Jim Crow era of the 19th and 20th centuries to the New Jim Code present in modern-day technology.

While physical, political, and economic violence has evolved since the conditional abolition of slavery, there is an ongoing psychological battle that Black people are faced with due to the effects of European colonialism and global anti-Blackness. Colonization has violently changed societies, erasing cultures, disrupting political institutions, and wiping out populations (Césaire and Pinkham 2000). For European colonialism to enact this violence, a two-fold process happens that Ugandan scholar Sylvia Tamale delineates as land and resources — particularly European colonization during the seventeenth century in the Americas, Asia, and Africa — coloniality

goes beyond the mere acquisition and political control of another country. As an ideological system, it explains the long-standing patterns of power that resulted from European colonialism, including knowledge production and the establishment of social orders. It is the "invisible power structure that sustains colonial relations of exploitation and domination long after the end of direct colonialism" (Tamale 2020, xiii).

As Tamale (2020) asserts, the psychological effects of colonialism still affect the Black Diaspora and show up in the cultural discourse we have online today. At the same time, these ideas are actively up for discussion and can be seen when analyzing conversations and responses to Marvel's *Black Panther* (2018).

The strength of the *Black Panther*

Directed by Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther* (2018) follows the story of T'Challa (Chadwick Bozeman), the new king of a technologically advanced African nation called Wakanda. After the death of his father, T'Challa takes on the mantle of Black Panther and must defend Wakanda from his cousin Kiillmonger (Michael B. Jordan), who wants to use the nation's resources to start a global revolution. Untouched by colonialism and racist imperialism, Wakanda represents a new, sovereign Afrikana nation (Tolókun and Kanyama-Jackson 2020) that decenters whiteness and promotes the development of a healthy racial identity (Glass et al. 2020). A decolonial and pro-Black approach to the film gives way to nuanced conversations that Black people were able to have on social media.

While much of the literature I engage in speaks to Black folks' Internet use, there is a lot of research waiting to be done that grapples with the everyday congregation of the Black Diaspora across the globe in a digital space. This is important because of its place in a larger historical context of how Africans and the Diaspora across the globe exist as an interconnected community. I specifically use discourse from the Black Diaspora, primarily on Twitter, that occurred after the release of *Black Panther* (2018) to outline how the Black digital space, similar to maroon communities, helps shape a transnational and multi-ethnic Black identity, has unique communal practices, and pushes back against oppressive systems.

Navigating the Black Diaspora in Digital Spaces

It would be remiss of me to not acknowledge how my own identity impacts my interest in and my opinions on this subject. As a Liberian-American woman who has been using social media as early as 11 years old and currently works in digital marketing, it is no wonder that my research interest revolves around the Black Diaspora in digital spaces. Growing up in a multiethnic home, I witnessed how two cultures simultaneously complement and brush up against each other while the larger world reads both as simply Black. This makes me keenly aware of points of contention and connection that show up within the Black Diaspora.

I will also point out that my understanding of Blackness is skewed by many things, most notably by growing up in a home where race, racism, and other systemic oppression were rarely discussed until the tragic death of Trayvon Martin and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. By then, I was already on social media learning a depth of African-American history that I was not being taught in American public

schools. My interest in seeking knowledge about Blackness across the globe began in

my undergraduate years getting a Minor in Black World Studies and continued as a

master's student in Critical Ethnic Studies. Using a critical ethnographic approach, I

used Twitter's search filters, articles that feature Tweets and hashtags related to the

film, as well as my own recollection of critical discussion points to gauge conversations

about the movie. During this process, I found three themes to discuss in this paper —

identity, resistance, and community.

As an avid participant in Black Twitter, I recognize that researching this space

comes with its benefits and challenges. On the one hand, I have a personal

understanding that informs the conclusions I come to. On the other, I struggle with the

reality of hyper-surveillance in Black communities, both digital and physical, and wonder

how much this research and others like it may contribute to this. To combat my worries,

I keep in mind that transnational ties within the Black community are informed by the

diversity in our cultures and histories, some of which I am more aware of than others.

This makes my discussion full of nuances, some of which I include and others I cannot

due to the length of this project.

#WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe

Cornell West (1992) defined identity as the interplay of desire — yearning for

recognition, association, and protection — and death — what we would be put to death

for or what we are willing to die for. In the context of Black identity, this desire for

recognition, association, and protection is intimately connected to the things we are

killed for and sacrifice our lives for, both figuratively and literally. This relationship is

apparent when looking at the formation of maroon communities. While maroon

communities exhibited a combination of African, Indigenous, and European cultures and peoples, their foundations were inherently African (Price 1996). As a result, most of these community members identified with self-liberated Africans fleeing from the realities of colonial slavery in the Americas. Risking death, they sought recognition from and association with others like them and protection from slave societies — going as far as waging pseudo-wars against impeding colonists and killing fellow maroons putting their communities at risk (Price 1996).

Throughout history, the specific issues faced globally by Africans and those of African descent have evolved, but we still find ways to identify with each other in the context of the times. Today we are witnessing a similar formation of a transnational Black identity on Twitter on a vast scale that would be challenging without digital technology. *Black Panther* (2018) allowed this phenomenon to continue on Twitter, enabling Black people around the world to engage in discussions about the movie.

A notable example is the viral hashtag created by Kayla Marie from Black Girl Nerds, #WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe. This hashtag included countless stories and images from Black Twitter users about the impact *Black Panther* (2018) had on us. We were able to watch an "all black cast being centered in blackness without being a victim to it" (JassyJeanette 2018). It not only allowed us to identify and see ourselves on the movie screen but also to identify with each other online. It became a cathartic and healing place to share our collective identity that has historically been weaponized for our oppression. We used the unprecedented success of an Afro-centric Marvel film to display our agency and reclaim a Black identity as a source of pride, purpose, and community.

Who Was Right — T'Challa or Killmonger?

Evidently, identity cannot exist in isolation and intertwines with others who share the same or similar identities. In a society where Black folk are faced with deadly consequences due to our identity, we establish predominantly Black safe spaces as places of relief from an oppressive world. Here is where we sift through narratives placed on us and determine our authentic selves (Reagon 1993). As we continue to evolve our understanding of what it means to be Black alongside others on a similar journey, it is expected that our differences show up.

Internal community tension was not absent in maroon communities, despite them having similar goals. These were spaces where Africans of various national, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds came together to work toward creating a society for themselves that exists outside of the slave system. Given this variety of thought, everyone was not always on the same page about how to go about achieving their collective goals. This can also be seen on Black Twitter. Any frequent user of Black Twitter is aware of the concept of Diaspora wars — cross-cultural debates among the Black Diaspora. These discourses can range from lightheartedly poking fun at what country makes the best jollof rice to more severe conversations that perpetuate internalized anti-Blackness. Operating in a transnational digital space comes with the tensions of cultures and ideas that we hold.

Discourse about *Black Panther* (2018) highlights this contention, particularly as people responded to the character Erik Killmonger, T'Challa's long-lost cousin from Compton, Los Angeles. As a child, Killmonger's father, N'Jobu, was sentenced to death by his brother T'Chaka for helping Wakandan war criminal Klaue steal vibranium,

leaving Killmonger alone without family in the United States. Filled with vengeance, Killmonger makes his way to Wakanda to reclaim his birthright to the throne and use the supernatural resources of Wakanda to aid in ending the global oppression of Black folk.

This sparked online debate from many perspectives, notably from African Americans resonating with the story of Killmonger. Understanding the feeling of betrayal by people who they believe had communal or familial ties to you, along with a disconnect from the culture and upbringing you would/should have grown up in. The hashtag #KillmongerWasRight was used to discuss some of the reasons why they believed Killmonger was justified in his approach to avenge his father's death and make strides toward the global liberation of Black folk. One thread outlines many reasons, some including problematizing Wakanda's lack of aid towards Black people dealing with oppression, characterizing the nation as "selfish, elitist Black folk… [w]ho for a very long time turned their back on Black folk" and were "okay with Black folk suffering so long as they can maintain their privileged way of life" (Johnny 2018).

Despite understanding the feelings that fuel Killmonger's anger some users, particularly Black women and femmes, could not ignore his hypermasculine approach. One user points out that Nakia and Killmonger had similar goals but the difference was that "Nakia's vision was not powered by vengeance, the thirst for world domination, and not backed by military and CIA training…" (Imani 2018). Another thread began in response to Christopher Lebron's (2018) *Boston Review* article "*Black Panther* is Not the Movie We Deserve." While in agreement that division is present between African and African American communities, the user claims that the title's use of "'we' is exclusive of Africans, and… clashes US and African attempts of [B]lack liberation

against each other" (J 2018a) Since colonialism operates on a divide and conquer

strategy, any attempt that pits the [B]lack American cause with… African post colonial

efforts" do more harm than good (J 2018b).

These discussions compel us to reflect on the concept of a Black community

and what we owe to one another. Here we are reckoning with the past and present, as

descendants of enslaved people in the United States grapple with what role some

Africans may have played in the slave trade, and vice versa. Twitter allows us to engage

with ideas from Black individuals who share similar backgrounds but may have diverse

perspectives due to their national, regional, or cultural upbringings. Although our

perspectives are not always in agreement, it is evident that the liberation, safety, and

success of Black folk in a violently anti-Black world is at the root of this discourse, and

discourses like it. At the end of the day, our communal practices prove that our

dedication to improving the lives of Black folk is present, even if and when we are at

odds with each other.

Looking beyond whiteness

Black folks' everyday use of Twitter allows us to confront the psychological

impacts of colonialism and global anti-Blackness. As the effects of European

colonialism operate two-fold (Tamale 2020), Black Twitter users respond to both

colonization (politico-economic exploitation) and coloniality (psychological

ramifications). On top of being a place where Black people are combating external

systemic issues — from discourse about media representations of the Baltimore

Uprising following the death of Freddie Gray (Thompson 2020) to racial injustice in

post-apartheid South Africa (Beukes 2017) — our everyday use of the app decenters

whiteness, allowing us the autonomy to define who we are as individuals and a collective.

The immense act of fleeing from enslavers is an undeniable form of resistance towards the slave system, but the continuous decision to exist outside of that system is a type of resistance that is too often overlooked. "Marronage is neither reducible to fleeing from states nor to movement within state borders. It is perpetual flight from slavery and an economy of survival… [T]he absence of a struggle to survive on the landscape would mean that we have never experienced the process of becoming free in the first place" (Roberts 2015, 171). After the initial flight, maroons chose their freedom daily, lessening the power of enslavers (Thompson 2006).

In a world where our existence is hyper-focused on our relationship(s) to whiteness, we must be able to operate outside of that for our liberation. Portraying an all-Black society untouched by colonialism and whiteness, *Black Panther* allows Black folk to conceptualize a version of this as our reality. This form of resistance is an ongoing project as we figure out what is or isn't important to us as a community that white supremacy and colonialism do not directly inform.

The two examples I use earlier hint at a readiness to explore what life beyond whiteness may look like for Black folk. The film and its discourses in some ways are complicit in the very systems it wants to combat, it is impossible to ignore that the desire to break away from oppressive systems is present. What is important is that our conversations make space for the nuance and perspective that is always present in the Black Diaspora. *Black Panther* (2018) and other films and media similar to it catalyze many conversations about Blackness, our place in the world, our relationships with each

other, and much more. The point is not to leave these discussions believing that the

work is done, but to push us further towards an idea and reality void of oppression.

     As a result, the digital space is now another transnational place for Black people

to engage with our identities, be in community with each other, and find ways to improve

our communities without the direct input of whiteness. While this space was not created

with our benefit in mind, much like colonial Americas, we continue to make it our own.

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