

# *Black Panther: Analysing the Anthropocene through the Aesthetics of Afrofuturism*

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## ABSTRACT

The Anthropocene era marks mankind's influence on the environment, especially through ecological damage caused by pollution, industrialization and global capitalism. It is crucial to analyse the politics of the Anthropocene by questioning the agency and power dynamic involved in environmental decision-making. Issues of agency are brought out in the film *Black Panther* (2018) by looking at racial politics, especially with regard to Africa and the African diaspora. One of the ways the movie does this is through the lens of Afrofuturism, which is an aesthetic movement that portrays African themes as well as issues such as racial discrimination through images of technology as well as a celebration of Africa's folk cultures. By such an intersection of past, present and possible futures, Afrofuturism provides a space for resistance to the Eurocentric domination. This paper aims to look at the various ecocentric Afrofuturistic strategies used in *Black Panther* to counter the dominant narratives in the Anthropocene, but also discusses some ecological shortcomings in the movie.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, Afrofuturism, Ecocentrism, Race, Gender, Technology, Indegenism, Neo-colonialism, Capitalism

## INTRODUCTION

*Black Panther*, a Marvel movie, based on the graphic novel series of the same name, released in theatres worldwide on 16 February 2018. It was one of the first mainstream superhero movies to feature a cast predominantly from the African diaspora (Hajela, 2018). It grossed around \$ 1.3 billion worldwide as of August 2018, making it one of the highest grossing superhero movies, especially one with a mainly black cast (IMDb). Its significance lies in the fact that, "For black America and the African diaspora, it places a political, social, and cultural marker that stories, non-fiction or fiction, centered around black people do matter and are bankable" (Hawkins, 2018). This paper aims to analyse the film *Black Panther* focussing on the Afrofuturistic aesthetics in the politics of the Anthropocene. For the purposes of the analysis, the film will be considered as a text and not many, if any at all, aspects of film studies will be used in the analysis.

According to Paul J. Crutzen, the Anthropocene is an era that is defined "by great technological and medical advancements and access to plentiful natural resources." This has "led to the expansion of mankind, both in numbers and per capita exploitation of Earth's resources" (2006, p. 14). Wakanda, a fictitious African country that was not colonised, and which has access to seemingly infinite amounts of the fictional resource of vibranium, is an advanced nation in the fields of medicine and technology. The movie *Black Panther*, however, is silent about the excessive resource utilisation by the nation

of Wakanda. Wakanda extensively uses vibranium in order to power its high-tech economy and its technologically advanced military.

Yet, the Wakandan system seems to be less exploitative than the Western capitalist system in terms of both nature and the people. The nation's resource consumption is countered by its sense of responsibility towards the Earth. Apart from its excessive resource use, Wakanda seems sensitive to the environment. "As a result of increasing fossil fuel burning, agricultural activities, deforestation, and intensive animal husbandry, especially cattle holding, several climatically important 'greenhouse' gases have substantially increased in the atmosphere over the past two centuries" (Crutzen, 2006, p. 15). Situated in such a world, Wakanda provides at least a partial alternative, albeit a fantastical one, to the problems faced by humans in the Anthropocene era. This seeming contradiction of resource consumption and eco-sensitivity in the movie portrays the complexity of the politics within the Anthropocene epoch as well.

Though the issues regarding resource utility and excessive human interference are significant aspects in the Anthropocene, the question of who controls the resources and who determines the narrative of environmental activism should also be considered. "One could object, for instance, that all the anthropogenic factors contributing to global warming—the burning of fossil fuel, industrialization of animal stock, the clearing of tropical and other forests, and so on—are after all part of a larger story: the unfolding of capitalism in the West and the imperial or quasi-imperial domination by the West of the rest of the world" (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 216).

Black Panther is conscious of this narrative of colonialism and neocolonialism and one of the ways in which it questions the colonial and neocolonial grand narrative is through the concept of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism is a strategy used by artists of African heritage to explore "African themes and concerns in the context of the twenty-first century technoculture—and more generally, African signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (Derry, 1994, p. 180).

Artists have long critiqued oppressive historical and contemporary events by employing Afrofuturism as an aesthetic strategy which explores themes such as slavery, colonialism, discrimination, violence, racism, etc. It does so in the context of technological changes contextualized through an African past. In Black Panther, Afrofuturistic strategies bring out possibilities for resistance and liberation, similar to the techniques used by many postcolonial authors which enable the creation of an alternative 'modernity' that is set apart from that of Eurocentrism and its legacy of white supremacy. Black Panther provides a critique of colonialism through its portrayal of the West's hunger for resources represented in Agent Ross and Ulysses Klaue. N'Jadaka/Killmonger's rage at the plight of disenfranchised people, especially people of African heritage, also speaks out against neocolonialism.

The concept of the Anthropocene presupposes that all human beings are universal, global citizens enjoying equal rights with an egalitarian agency to influence the world around them. As a consequence, ecological policies are often framed on the belief that all humans are equally responsible for the environment. However, this assumption often colors ecological politics and leads to the exploitation and alienation of a majority of the people across the world. Subaltern theorists like Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak insist that in order to displace unrealistic assumptions that ignore "diverse human experiences, positions, affects, cultures, and views of justice and injustice" (Meyers, 2016, p. 50), we must recognize the Earth as both "the familiar place we inhabit" and a place of otherness that can never be home (quoted in Meyers, 2016, p. 47).

This paradoxical view of the Earth occurs due to the obscurities surrounding the concept of the Anthropocene. These include "the 'newness' of the idea of humanity as exhibiting geophysical agency," how the concept of the Anthropocene is likely to influence the framing of political policies across the world, and how the Anthropocene as a concept is received by the public at large (Meyers, 2016, p. 47). The framing of human beings as a monolithic political class that has universal geopolitical agency blurs the deep gulfs between the global elite and the historically disenfranchised, especially when seen from

the point of view of access to resources and political agency. Therefore, attempts to organize and frame policy to address global ecological concerns, purely based on the concept of the Anthropocene will risk the pursuit of “our-all-too-human but legitimate quest for justice” (quoted in Meyers, 2016, p. 47). Black Panther’s Afrofuturism portrays this non-universality of agency through characters such as N’Jadaka/Killmonger, T’Challa and Nakia and their take on Wakanda’s foreign policy.

In order to be inclusive of the needs of global citizens who do not possess any meaningful sense of agency in the Anthropocene, Chakrabarty suggests that we distinguish between the “global” (globalization, capitalism and industrialization) and the “planetary” (climate change, etc.) components of the Anthropocene. “An understanding of the Anthropocene, then, requires the simultaneous recognition of human powers to transform the nonhuman world and the limits of intentional human action, given our inescapable embeddedness in planetary processes that are beyond human control” (Meyers, 2016, p. 48).

According to Wahneema Lubiano, while “the limits of intentional human action” are portrayed in N’Jadaka/Killmonger’s subjugated position, the women in the movie are given more agency in decision-making processes (Duke University’s Department of African and African American Studies, 2018). A number of Wakandan women are shown to occupy prominent positions in the military, departments of science and technology and in the monarchy. T’Challa’s reign would flounder without support from women such as Okoye and the Dora Milaje, Nakia, Shuri and his mother.

Indeed, the film hints at an alternative vision, that of Nakia, which blends the concern for the planetary and the global. Nakia emphasises the need to open Wakanda, its resources, as well as its culturally and ecologically sensitive approach to the rest of the world. The movie culminates in T’Challa addressing the UN stating that Wakanda is finally ready to engage with the world and end its isolationism (Feige & Coogler, 2018).

“The idea of the Anthropocene epoch lets us understand the ecological crisis of the present day in the context of the distant past” (Davies, 2016, p. 2). Apart from contextualizing the Anthropocene in terms of human socio-political histories, it can also be read through the folk traditions, an ancient heritage that imbues a sense of respect to the natural world. Simultaneously, it raises questions as to how one can solve issues of human interference through contemporary aspects such as technology. The Afrofuturistic elements of Black Panther also represent these aspects of the Anthropocene—a combination of scientific advancement and a sense of connectedness with Africa’s folk roots. The movie looks at contemporary and futuristic technology in relation to the natural landscape by emphasizing the folk elements of the various African tribes through the costume as well as the mystical/traditional beliefs and customs which have a connection to the ecology.

The Anthropocene in the futuristic world of Wakanda can be seen through Afrofuturistic elements like critiques of neocolonialism and colonialism, racial and gender representations, science and technology and the depiction of folk influences in the aesthetics of the movie.

### **AFROFUTURISM AND THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF WAKANDA**

“Whether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques” (Womack, 2013, p. 9). Specifically, Afrofuturism critiques and holds accountable science fiction where “even in the imaginary future... people can’t fathom a person of non-Euro descent a hundred years into the future” (Womack, 2013, p. 7). Such a lack of representation is reenvisioned in a movie like Black Panther.

Black Panther’s importance in terms of representation of the people and culture of Africa and the

African diaspora cannot be overstated. The cast, which includes African-Americans, British Africans and Africans, disregards Hollywood's colorism in relation to casting black actors. Feminist scholars like Itohan Osayimwese have praised the film's attempts at "countering the coding of blackness with negativity" (Brown University, 2018) through its portrayal of a diversity of black bodies, visuals and material cultures. The female characters are depicted with natural hair or baldness which are often perceived negatively by the industries that enforce white standards of beauty and aesthetics. The film also "recalibrates our reading of African traditions of body ornamentations like piercings, tattooing, jewelry and other forms of body modifications" (Brown University, 2018).

Therefore, the casting and depiction of African visual and material cultures contribute to the pan-African aesthetic and appeal of the film. "Pan-Africanism was the attempt to create a sense of brotherhood and collaboration among all people of African descent whether they lived inside or outside of Africa" (historians.org). The filmmakers allude to the pan-African cause in the form of numerous Easter eggs throughout the film. In one particular scene filmed in South Korea, Okoye, T'Challa, and Nakia are dressed in red, black and green respectively—the colors of the pan-African flag (Willis, 2018).

Coogler represents Wakanda as a pan-African ideal of a state that has not suffered the ravages of colonialism and is free from the threat of neocolonial exploitation. This is distinct from the several resource-rich African countries which have been victimized by Western neoliberal forces' attempts at gaining control of their resources and economies. These attempts have resulted in violent uprisings, military coups, puppet regimes, manmade famines and genocides. Within this atmosphere there have been several homegrown resistance movements that have employed both peaceful means and armed resistance in order to regain control. Several postcolonial African nations have also been victims of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence," referring to "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically viewed as not violence at all" (quoted in Ugor, 2015).

In order to protect Wakanda from such a fate and to prevent the spread of vibranium weaponry, the Wakandan monarchy had long established a policy of isolationism and maintained secrecy about its vibranium mines and its advanced technology (Feige & Coogler, 2018). Though these policies succeeded in protecting Wakanda and preserving its way of life, it alienated people like N'Jadaka/Killmonger, who viewed this focus on self-preservation as a moral failing of the Wakandan leadership.

Wakanda is also a symbolic homeland to the diasporic community, as portrayed in N'Jadaka/Killmonger. "Killmonger is the heart of the philosophical and political questions in the film but also in the real struggle and experience of black people in America. Erik Stevens carries the burden of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, slavery, reconstruction, Jim/Jane Crow, and the social movements for freedom. Upon the death of his father Prince N'Jobu at the hands of T'Chaka/Black Panther, his heart is filled with rage and a yearning to discover his ancestry" (Hawkins, 2018).

Nevertheless, the policy of isolationism has also meant that unlike many developed Western nations, Wakanda has historically never had any imperial or colonial design over its African neighbors. It seems to be aware of the destructive effects of colonialism on its neighbors and therefore is not exploitative of its potential position as an economic and technological global power. T'Challa seeks to undo the negative effect of years of Wakandan isolation by trying to leverage its dominant position through outreach efforts in the form of technology transfer and aid to the disempowered.

Despite its long-held peace and prosperity, there was clearly a diversity of opinions and disagreements with regards to both foreign and domestic policies. In Wakanda's history, there was a conflict between the various tribes (the river, merchant, mining, border and mountain tribes), who eventually united under the Black Panther's rule. The divine right given by the goddess Bast made the Black Panther's economic and cultural values the dominant hegemonic force within Wakandan society. However, the ideology of the Black Panther was rejected by the Jabari, the mountain tribe (Feige & Coogler, 2018).

The Jabari harvest timber which possesses magical properties due to the presence of vibranium. This seems to be a more sustainable solution since they prefer a renewable resource as opposed to a non-renewable one like the mineral from the vibranium mines of Mount Bashenga. They also seem to have a more sustainable, non-Eurocentric approach to the usage of natural resources. For instance, their primary weapon is made of vibranium wood (Francisco, 2018). Despite the enmity between the Jabari and the other tribes, when the nation's policy of peace and non-interference is under threat, the Jabari finally join hands with the elite of Wakanda in order to protect the greater interest of the nation and the world as well as to ensure that vibranium doesn't get into the wrong hands.

Another fissure within Wakandan society is seen among citizens who, due to various motivations, want a greater engagement with the world. W'Kabi, a member of the border tribe, is agitated by what he views as T'Challa's inaction and the apathy of Wakandan leadership when faced with attacks on Wakanda from hostile outside forces such as Klaue. This dissatisfaction leads to W'Kabi's enthusiasm for N'Jadaka/Killmonger's plan to distribute vibranium-powered arms among the African diaspora and other oppressed populations of the world. Both of them are motivated by rage due to the murder of their parents. W'Kabi's parents were killed in an attack masterminded by Klaue, and N'Jadaka/Killmonger's rage stems from the state sponsored assassination of his father, N'Jobu (Feige & Coogler, 2018).

The film also draws attention to the economic and socio-political realities of the Anthropocene through the scene at the British museum. N'Jadaka/Killmonger enquires about the various ceremonial African masks displayed as "artefacts" in the West African exhibit. In fact, when N'Jadaka/Killmonger first speaks to the expert at the museum, he calls the African masks "artefacts" (Feige & Coogler, 2018). Itohan Osayimwese states that, "African art used to be thought of as ethnographic objects or artefacts. In fact, they were not strange fetish objects, but actually played an integral role in the societies from which they originated" (Brown University, 2018). By using the term "artefact" N'Jadaka/Killmonger mimics and thereby mocks the Western intelligentsia's view of cultural objects originating from Africa as primitive and outdated. The movie undermines this perspective by portraying similar masks in numerous scenes in an advanced nation like Wakanda.

N'Jadaka/Killmonger, in order to reclaim his African heritage, dons a mask that he acquires from the museum when he attacks T'Challa in Korea. This mask, called the Mgbedike, a mask of the Igbo tribe, might refer to the members of the Igbo tribe brought as slaves to America during the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Chambers, 2016). Baldera notes that the final dialogue of N'Jadaka/Killmonger, where he says, "Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from the ships, because they knew death was better than bondage" (Feige & Coogler, 2018), alludes to N'Jadaka/Killmonger's heritage as a descendant of the defiant Igbo slaves who rebelled against their captors in the event called the Igbo Landing (Baldera, 2018). While rebelling, the Igbo people took control of the ship and killed their captors.

The mask associated with this incident recapitulates N'Jadaka/Killmonger's spirit of resistance. In the museum, N'Jadaka/Killmonger also chides the expert on her incorrect knowledge of a Wakandan axe. He expresses his desire to reclaim his heritage by possessing the Wakandan weapon on display. When the expert exclaims that the items on display are not for sale, N'Jadaka/Killmonger confronts her with the facts about the historical acquisition of the artefacts. He says, "How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it like they took everything else?" (Feige & Coogler, 2018).

As a Western institution of cultural hegemony, the museum accurately portrays the realities of the Anthropocene. The colonial and neocolonial forces have acquired and monopolized the resources of the world, leaving a large section of the world's population without access to them. N'Jadaka/Killmonger's role in this, therefore, is to reclaim and redistribute these resources that are in the hands of a powerful few. In this regard, he equates T'Challa with the West in his control of resources, which N'Jadaka/Killmonger would use "to arm oppressed people all over the world" (Feige & Coogler, 2018).

The movie explores the dialectic between two different visions of a thriving future for the African diaspora and Wakanda. N'Jadaka/Killmonger transforms his rage into a plan for a sustained campaign for the overthrow of existing Eurocentric, capitalist powers by the proliferation of vibranium-powered arms amongst the global disenfranchised. On the other hand, T'Challa looks for a more compliant solution that seeks to address the same problems by a gradual expansion of Wakanda's worldview. This includes propagating the usage of less exploitative technology powered by vibranium which would serve to bridge the gap between the elite and the disenfranchised. T'Challa's vision should be seen through his position as a member of the ruling elite in Wakanda, which has never faced oppression, as opposed to N'Jadaka/Killmonger's position as a product and victim of a capitalist and racist society.

The resolution of the conflict between the vision of T'Challa and N'Jadaka/Killmonger, i.e., the conflicted perspective about the foreign and domestic policy of Wakanda, may address the politics in the Anthropocene. Both T'Challa at the end of the movie, and N'Jadaka/Killmonger want to promote the distribution and use of vibranium across the globe. However, the way in which they decide to do this differs drastically. While T'Challa is seen to still hold the reign of power and decision making in the usage of vibranium, N'Jadaka/Killmonger seems to want to democratise the resource by distributing it to the larger populace of subjugated people.

Amongst a predominantly black cast, the depiction of the two Caucasian characters in the film is significant as they are representations of colonialism and its hegemony in the politics of the Anthropocene. Ulysses Klaue represents the resource-hungry, exploitative colonizer whose only aim is to obtain vibranium and use it to create weapons. Klaue is motivated by greed as he acquires vibranium by nefarious means and sells it to the highest bidder through the black market. Klaue's actions mirror the actions of the European colonizing forces who conquered, plundered and ruled resource-rich colonies through the threat of violence.

Everett Ross, too, can be seen as a representation of the subtle neocolonial agent. When compared to Klaue, Ross is quiet and observant. He tries to manipulate alliances between the resource-rich Wakanda and the West. Matthew Guterl critiques the portrayal of Agent Ross as the "good white character" who masters Wakandan technology and sabotages N'Jadaka/Killmonger's plan to distribute vibranium weapons by shooting down the last shipment flying out of Wakanda's protective air shield. Guterl locates Agent Ross in the MCU's tradition of pairing a white superhero with a black sidekick in the shadows (Brown University, 2018). For instance, Chris Evans' portrayal as Captain America is paired with Anthony Mackie's Falcon functioning as a sidekick in the shadows. So also, Tony Stark and War Machine. These pairings function as superficial attempts at depicting unity without elaborating on the complicated racial dynamics. In *Black Panther*, Agent Ross acts as a sidekick to T'Challa in his quest to protect Wakanda and undermine N'Jadaka/Killmonger's revolutionary actions. Both Ross and Klaue have the ability to enter non-white communities and manipulate or coerce them in order to exploit their resources in the race for power and influence in the Anthropocene.

Gender is also an important intersection in the construction of identity in the Anthropocene. The fact that "Gender often remains unarticulated in discussions of the Anthropocene" is a challenge that *Black Panther* tries to overcome. The movie acknowledges that "treating the 'anthropos' of the Anthropocene as an undifferentiated species will reproduce the privilege of the conventionally unmarked social actors (i.e., white, cis-gendered, heterosexual men in the global North)" (Theriault, 2015). *Black Panther* provides a space of equal responsibility for the women of Wakanda, who serve in diverse prominent positions alongside their male counterparts.

Nakia, a spy and a member of the Wakandan War Dogs, the central intelligence service of Wakanda, insists on changing Wakanda's isolationist policies. On numerous occasions, she implores T'Challa to intervene and provide aid and support to Wakanda's neighbors in the face of violence and neocolonial

exploitation. Nakia's vision for the future of Wakanda makes up the moral center of the politics of the movie. In fact, Wahneema Lubiano among others view T'Challa as a trainee or disciple of Nakia's instructions on reconfiguring Wakandan leadership to serve the pan-African goal of liberation and prosperity (Duke University's Department of African and African American Studies, 2018). Nakia tells the king, "You can't let your father's mistakes define who you are. You get to decide what kind of king you are going to be" (Feige & Coogler, 2018). She is also the one who calls out Okoye when she supports N'Jadaka/Killmonger after the overthrow of T'Challa. When Okoye asks Nakia to serve her country she responds, "No. I save my country" (Feige & Coogler, 2018). Nakia, therefore, helps meet the global challenges of the Anthropocene epoch which remains engulfed in economic disparities and political violence.

Nakia provides a different, more sensitive perspective on the role of an intelligence agent in the modern nation state, functioning in stark contrast to Everett Ross who is first seen buying vibranium from Ulysses Klaue (Feige & Coogler, 2018). On the other hand, Nakia's first appearance is during a rescue mission (Blaec, 2018). She tells T'Challa, "I've found my calling out there. I've seen too many in need just to turn a blind eye. I can't be happy here knowing that there's people out there who have nothing... Share what we have. We could provide aid and access to technology and refuge to those who need it. Other countries do it, we could do it better" (Feige & Coogler, 2018). She acknowledges the responsibility that a nation such as Wakanda holds in the global sphere.

Nakia is a representation of feminists who "have for decades been at the forefront of challenging the nature/society binary" (Duke University's Department of African and African American Studies, 2018). Not only is she at the forefront of Wakandan politics, her ecocentric approach can be seen in the spaces she is portrayed in, especially in her interactions with T'Challa. Most of the conversations between Nakia and T'Challa occur in open spaces—either in the city, or in the wilderness. The first interaction between the two occurs in the forest. When T'Challa is first crowned king and when he finally informs Nakia that he has an outreach programme planned, they are walking through the city streets of Wakanda. When T'Challa is confused about how he should rule his country, the two are sitting on a mountain-top (Feige & Coogler, 2018). These interactions show that Nakia, more than the others, is a woman of the people and terrain. She is portrayed as someone who would do anything to protect subjugated people as well as the physical landscape of not just her country, but also the world, constantly reiterating the need to end Wakanda's isolationism.

In keeping with the aesthetics of Afrofuturism, the women in Black Panther are a combination of ancient traditions and contemporary science and technology. The Dora Milaje, the army inspired by the women warriors of the Dahomey tribe, and led by Okoye, are tasked with protecting the Wakandan crown (Coleman, 2018). When W'Kabi allies himself with N'Jadaka/Killmonger's cause of proliferating Wakanda's weapons throughout the world, Okoye protests by reminding the council that Wakandan weapons are meant only for defence, in an attempt to safeguard Wakanda's policies against external influences. Okoye's presence at the council indicates that women warriors of Wakanda have for long had a role in creating and maintaining Wakanda's foreign and military policy. Unwilling to give up the Dora Milaje's identity as a primarily defensive force, she is reluctant to undo the longstanding policy of non-intrusion and a defensive stance in military operations for W'Kabi and N'Jadaka/Killmonger's offence-dominated military strategy. Okoye's identity is intrinsically linked to her sense of belonging to the Wakandan homeland.

Arica L Coleman emphasizes the need to create a world "without a history of 'environmental degradation, colonialism, cultural genocide or the elevation of white aesthetics to the exclusion of all else'" (Coleman, 2018). In order to do this, she states that "Part of the real work of creating such a world must begin with moving black women, in the words of bell hooks, 'from margin to center,' and creating an aesthetics that challenges, refutes and destroys those stereotypical concepts of black womanhood"

(Coleman, 2018). When W’Kabi bows in surrender to Okoye, during the battle between T’Challa and N’Jadaka/Killmonger (Feige & Coogler, 2018), we can see a “just proposition of the erotics of gender relations between black people” (Brown University, 2018). The scene dismantles the stereotype of regressive gender roles in non-white societies. W’Kabi, who gained the upper hand in decision making during N’Jadaka/Killmonger’s rise to power, shows strength in acknowledging Okoye’s superior judgement in this situation and demonstrates his willingness to surrender to her.

When T’Challa is overthrown in ritual combat by N’Jadaka/Killmonger, Okoye feels compelled to remain by the side of the latter. She tells Nakia, “I am loyal to the throne, no matter who sits upon it” (Feige & Coogler, 2018). Okoye is the general and therefore more aware of the political nuances of international ties. When a mortally wounded Everett Ross is brought to Wakanda, Okoye wants to leave him to die. She says of Ross, “Let us consider that we heal him. It is his duty to report back to his country” (Feige & Coogler, 2018). Her primary concern is that he will jeopardize Wakanda’s isolationism if the secret of vibranium and Wakanda’s technologically advanced society spreads.

Black Panther engages with the politics of the African diaspora and other oppressed people in the Anthropocene with the aesthetic of Afrofuturism on several levels, the most impactful one being that of its portrayal of Wakanda. The central characters like T’Challa, Nakia, Shuri and N’Jadaka/Killmonger place Wakanda and their concern for its future as the primary motivation for their actions in the film, arguably making Wakanda a character with palpable agency rather than a mere setting in which the movie’s action takes place. In order to understand this attraction to Wakanda, we must explore its construction as an Afrofuturistic utopia in the Anthropocene. Wakanda can be established as such a utopia based on Ernst Bloch’s model of “outlines of a better world” where an individual is able to thrive “without alienation and exploitation” (Kellner, n.d.). He states that a utopian democracy becomes a true definition of homeland. In the Afrofuturistic context this model of utopia as portrayed in Wakanda is important to Africans and the African diaspora.

Dipesh Chakrabarty voices his concern that the Anthropocene might “lead to the flattening of human differences and the forced imposition of top-down solutions upon society” (Chakrabarty, 2009). In T’Challa’s last speech at the United Nations, he reiterates an ideology of inclusiveness by opening up Wakanda, its resources and technology to the rest of the world. However, this is still a “top-down solution” that takes for granted certain assumptions about power and privilege, which ignores the reason behind N’Jadaka/Killmonger’s rage and defers political agency from the masses, something which Chakrabarty calls as the “quest for justice” (Chakrabarty, 2009). T’Challa’s notion of Wakanda as a utopic homeland which doesn’t alienate or exploit is problematized when placed within the politics of the Anthropocene.

The Afrofuturistic representation of people and places in Black Panther sheds light on the problematic status of the politics of the Anthropocene. It foregrounds the question of agency and critiques the notion that the politics of the Anthropocene holds all humans equally accountable for the environmental crisis.

## **AFROFUTURISM: FOLK INFLUENCES AND TECHNOLOGY**

In the introduction to *Global Indigenous Media: Cultures, Poetics, and Politics*, editors Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart note that, “...the industrialized, mass-produced messages and images—and accompanying technologies—in most cases have represented the perspectives, values, and institutional structures of empire” (Wilson & Stewart, 2008, p. 3). Wilson and Stewart emphasize the importance of a global indigenous media which functions as a “negotiation of sovereignty issues as well as a discursive locus for issues of control over land, and territory, subjugation and dispossession under colonization, cultural distinctiveness and the question of ethnicity and minority status, questions of local and traditional knowledge, self-identification and recognition by others, and notions of Indigeneity and Indigenism



themselves” (Wilson & Stewart, 2008, p. 5).

Both in the production process as well as within the film *Black Panther*, we see an emphasis on such indigenous forms of media. The film portrays a distinct identity politics of both African Americans and Africans. Wilson and Stewart refer to Erica-Irene A. Daes’s definition of “indigenous” which, they note, include: a) people who occupy and use the resources of a given territory; b) cultural distinctiveness in language, social organization, religious and spiritual values, modes of production and laws and institutions; c) self-identification/recognition by other groups or state authorities as a distinct collective; and d) groups which experience subjugation, marginalisation, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination (Wilson & Stewart, 2008, p. 14). By this definition, the indigenous experience can be attributed to Ryan Coogler, as well as the central characters of *Black Panther*, such as N’Jadaka/Killmonger and T’Challa.

T’Challa’s address at the UN functions as a representation of “international indigenism” which is “a philosophical and cultural attitude toward the world that is shared by all Indigenous peoples, a model for global conduct in its resistance to colonialism, imperialism, environmental destruction, and now, globalization” (Wilson & Stewart, 2008, p. 8). Indeed, the last line delivered by T’Challa in his speech is: “We all know the truth. More connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis, the wise build bridges while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe” (Feige & Coogler, 2018).

In this speech, T’Challa states that all humanity forms a “single tribe.” In doing so, T’Challa brings indigenous systems of belief to the world platform which could help the entire planet politically as well as ecologically. If international indigenism is a resistance to environmental destruction, the final speech by the Wakandan ruler is also a call for ecological peace through tribal representations and folk elements.

Ytasha Womack notes that the discovery of lost African works made it clear “that there was a tradition of sci-fi or futuristic works created by people of African descent that stretched back to pre-colonial Africa” (Womack, 2013, p. 19). Afrofuturism takes such concepts of past futures and incorporates it in contemporary representations of Africa.

By looking at the future in terms of African cultures and traditions that were colonized and affected by globalization and industrialization, *Black Panther* also partially provides an alternative, more respectful approach to the landscape. Often, human interference in the Anthropocene is considered to have a negative impact on the globe but *Black Panther*, to a certain extent, attempts to mitigate these effects through the use of folk motifs and depiction of the advanced technology of Wakanda.

The folk elements prevalent in the movie revert to the ancient customs that respected the natural world and treated the landscape and animals on par with human beings. The movie intermingles such ancient systems with futuristic scientific and technological advancement. Womack notes that Afrofuturism is not only about the future but “can weave mysticism with its social commentary too” (Womack, 2013, p. 10). Representation and material cultures in the movie draw their images from tribal societies and yet place them within a futuristic context, emphasizing the movie’s Afrofuturism.

The most significant way in which African traditions are represented in the movie is through costume. This reinforces the pan-Africanism of *Black Panther*. Costume designer Ruth E. Carter notes that most of the costumes were inspired by various tribal attires. The beadwork for the Dora Milaje was taken from the Masaai, Turkana and Himba tribes and their neck and arm rings from the Ndebele tribe. Zuri wears the avagado, a caftan worn by Nigerian men, with the Tuareg from North Africa ([femalefirst.co.uk](http://femalefirst.co.uk), 2018). Ramonda, the Queen Mother, wears a headdress called the isicholos, which is from the Zulu tribe, meant for married women. Some of the border tribes wear Besotho blankets (Goel, 2018).

T’Challa, as a Wakandan leader, wears a tailored black suit when representing the country to the rest of the world. Yet, he often dons a scarf which has traditional weaves on it. Even his superhero suit has what Ruth E. Carter calls the “Okavango pattern,” based on the Okavango delta, with Wakandan writing across the suit (Abrams, 2018). In stark contrast to the tribal element of Wakandans, N’Jadaka/

Killmonger is clothed in 'regular' attire. Carter says, "He needed to have a vibe of a regular African American guy. I think Ryan Coogler felt like, this guy could afford anything. He's unapologetic. He'll spend \$2,500 dollars on a pair of Christian Dior combat boots" (Gruttadaro, 2018). Carter emphasizes that "Wakanda is rooted in Africa, and because the nation was never colonized, we imagined a world and how it would look if it remained unconquered" (Abrams, 2018). It is this which poses the stark contrast between N'Jadaka/Killmonger and the Wakandans.

The Afrofuturistic costumes in the movie elude to folk traditions which are ecocentric and a representation of international indigenism. The characters who don these costumes can be seen as a resistance to neocolonialism and the harmful ecological impacts that it entails. Black Panther, through such folk representations depicts the politics of the Anthropocene.

Such patterns are not only seen in the costume, but even in the setting, especially in Shuri's lab, a space of biomimicry architecture. Spaces of clinical 'objectivity' are appropriated by folk art and graffiti. The visuals also emphasize that the lab is not just any tinted-glass skyscraper but is rather built into the stone walls of the mines where vibranium is found. It is, in a sense, part of the earth.

The folk narrative is also emphasized through animal images such as the panther (the creation story of the Black Panther and the unity of the Wakandans) and the monkey (worshipped by the Jabari tribe) as well as in animals such as the rhino. The significance of animals in African religions is mentioned in the *Encyclopaedia of African Religion* (Vol. 2): "Many African stories hold that long ago people and animals could communicate and that individuals in some cultures were able to become one with specific animals. Over time, this ability was lost to most people except for select specialists such as hunters, healers, shaman, priests, or priestesses. Although communication was no longer possible, reverence remained" (Asante & Mazama, 2009, p. 54). The Black Panther, a warrior shaman (Feige & Coogler, 2018), is the one who can slip into the being of an animal—the panther. This is portrayed when T'Challa visits his father in the ancestral plane, where T'Chaka, and in the second visit, all the ancestors emerge from the panther to stand in front of T'Challa (Feige & Coogler, 2018). The man and the animal are one.

The reverence is not only in the correlation between man and animal, but also when the Wakandans invoke the goddess Bast. While recounting the history of Wakanda, N'Jobu says, "And when the time of men came five tribes settled on it and called it Wakanda. The tribes lived in constant war with each other until a warrior shaman received a vision from the panther goddess Bast who led him to the heart-shaped herb, a plant that granted him superhuman strength, speed and instincts. The warrior became king and the first Black Panther, the protector of Wakanda" (Feige & Coogler, 2018). Thus, the king is not only a fighter, who protects his territory, but also a shaman who can communicate with spirits, and who is attuned to the natural world.

Aside from the animal images, comes the most poignant scene of the bond between humans and animals, as shown in the final battle. When W'Kabi sounds his horn, calling forth the rhinos that he had trained for battle, one of the animals charges toward M'Baku. Okoye steps between the rhino and the Jabari leader and on seeing her, the rhino gives her a friendly lick (Feige & Coogler, 2018). Even W'Kabi, who trains the rhinos for battle, treats them with care (Feige & Coogler, 2018).

Such sensitivity towards the natural world is not only portrayed in the folk representations, but also in the futurism of Wakanda. According to Hannah Beachler, the technology in Wakanda was designed to be unique to the region and devoid of influences from the external world, "developed through the evolution of their traditions" (Mohapi, 2018). Therefore, though it may seem futuristic to the viewer, the cultural heritage of Africa is depicted in the technology, as seen in the Wakandan aircrafts. Beachler also emphasizes that science, technology and innovations of Wakanda are heavily influenced by the environment and landscape of Wakanda. Generations of Wakandans have been able to use vibranium as a resource due to their ingenious scientific and technological advancement, which is influenced by its ecocentric folklore.

Shuri represents the face of technology and scientific advancement of her people. Just as Shuri discards the 'clinical' lab coat for a white dress even as her hair is styled traditionally with beads, her technology, too, is a combination of the folk and the contemporary. Fascinated by the wonders that technology can work on her people, Shuri creates much of the technology seen in the movie. The planes used in the vibranium mines, or the Dragon Flyers, were created to mimic dragonflies. "After drawing a bunch of sketches of trying to turn birds into planes,' she landed on the dragonfly... 'It had to fit in the film, it had to feel like Shuri designed all of them within a certain time of each other'" (Johnson, 2018). Shuri, therefore, creates most of the contemporary technology of Wakanda, and from what Beachler says, they draw on a lot of folk and natural elements. The Dragon Flyer, for instance, is shaped like an insect. From an aerial view, the luxurious Royal Talon Fighter is designed to represent a traditional Dogon mask (Johnson, 2018). "As we started developing by evolving different parts of traditions we found that so many traditions through many tribes relate back to nature and biology, so we ran with that and found that to be fitting to the uniqueness and ingenuity of Wakanda," said Beachler (Johnson, 2018). Shuri, then, becomes the face of the Afrofuturistic link between scientific advancement and a folk tradition which respects nature.

The carving of the animal images of the panther and the gorilla function as the entry to the mines of Wakanda and the home of the Jabari tribe respectively. This, too, emphasizes the importance and sanctity given to both vibranium as well as Jabari wood. On the other hand, though the technology fits into the Afrofuturistic aesthetic, it is still a depiction of the concerns of a Western capitalist mindset. The progress of scientific advancement in Wakanda seems akin to the concerns of the West with regard to the development of weaponry and other tools that exploit nature, such as the mining technology which use advanced jets like the Dragon Flyers in order to extract vibranium.

The panels in Shuri's lab pulse and throb. According to Perception, one of the visual effects teams that worked on Black Panther, "Based on shapes and forms seen in the set design, Perception proposed that the hexagonal pattern seen on the wall actually reveal itself to be articulating panels. These panels pulse and ripple, suggesting a physical surface that is uniquely Wakandan" (experienceperception.com, n.d.). This, along with the changing colours of the images to suit Shuri's clothing, give the lab a very personal and humane touch.

A lot of Shuri's creations also emphasize the folk roots of Africa. Shuri creates a panther suit to replace T'Challa's design which she calls "functional but old" (Feige & Coogler, 2018). Here, she incorporates Wakandan lettering to highlight the link between the suit and the homeland. Perception also notes that the suit comprises of "sub-dermal' luminescent tattoos, an idea inspired directly from the comics. These tattoos were designed to not only mimic the pattern work on the suit, but also draw inspiration from the designs of Wakanda itself" (experienceperception.com, n.d.). Just like the Dogon-mask-like appearance of the Royal Talon Fighter, these tattoos too establish the importance of traditional and folk belief in the scientific advancement of Wakanda.

Ryan Coogler highlights the necessity of science and technology to be conscious of the world that it is functioning in and this is best depicted in the character of Shuri. She is a young girl who is a mixture of the contemporary and the folk. Dressed in complete traditional attire, she tells her brother in front of all Wakandans, "This corset is really uncomfortable, so could we all just wrap it up and go home" (Feige & Coogler, 2018). She is comfortable wearing dresses, but with jewellery that is essentially African. Her hairstyle, too, is beaded or tied into cornrows. She has been influenced by American popular culture. She tells her brother that she has created 'sneakers', "Fully automated. Like the old American movie baba used to watch" (Feige & Coogler, 2018). Yet, what she creates excels the West's capabilities in technological advancement. The influence that American cinema and popular culture has on Shuri reinforces the notion that the material technological creations of Wakanda like the jets, biometrics, etc. are also Eurocentric in their portrayal. Yet, what the Wakandans create seems to be sensitive to the land and the people.

If “legal codes, political institutions, philosophical movements, organized religions, and so on are also technologies” (Okoye, 2016), then religion becomes a non-material technology which extends human interaction with the universe. The experience of T’Challa and N’Jadaka/Killmonger in the spiritual realm shows their different approaches to resolving the paradoxes of the Anthropocene, one of belonging and alienation. In T’Challa’s case it is working on the legacy left by his ancestors, and to create an identity for himself as a twenty-first century monarch of Wakanda and a conscious citizen of the world. While for N’Jadaka/Killmonger, alienated both from his African American and Wakandan heritage, it is to avenge the wrongs done to his ancestors by enforcing radical change.

T’Challa, sensitive to the issues that his country faces, but also aware of the world outside, meets his ancestors in African plains, where they visit him with their panther spirits. N’Jadaka/Killmonger, alienated from his land and people, does not have access to these ancestors. All he has is his father. Such an alienation is the reason he orders the burning of the garden of the heart-shaped herb and doesn’t hesitate to hold in a strangle-hold the priestess who takes care of the garden (Feige & Coogler, 2018).

While Afrofuturistic use of technology and folk representations in Black Panther reveal an eco-consciousness and sensitivity towards the earth, the magical powers of the Black Panther and the access that the heart-shaped herb gives him to enter the realm of the ancestors can once again be connected to the politics of human agency in the Anthropocene, one which is vested in T’Challa and not N’Jadaka/Killmonger.

## CONCLUSION

Though vibranium is the key resource which powers most of the technology of Wakanda, the fact that the metal is a finite resource is not acknowledged. This becomes more problematic when T’Challa decides to open up Wakanda and its resource to the world. Though the control of vibranium is still vested in the Wakandan monarchy, it should be highlighted that Black Panther, produced by Walt Disney Studios, does not provide answers to questions of resource utility and the environmental impact of production and consumption. Its depiction of scientific advancement, though rooted in Afrofuturistic aesthetic, still reflects the needs and concerns of Western militarism and capitalism.

While the movie throws open the discussion on race and racial biases by employing strategies of Afrofuturism, it has not raised the issue of resource depletion, a real threat to life in the Anthropocene. The movie addresses the politics of the Anthropocene, in terms of providing an Afrofuturistic, more eco-conscious science and through representations of folk traditions. Folk representations in the costume, architecture and technology emphasize the importance of indigenous wisdom in the global sphere through an international indiginism, offering an alternative to destructive actions of humans.

Black Panther fails to discuss the issue of human interference in the natural world by means of exploitation of resources, but it addresses the global challenges with regard to the non-universality of agency especially among historically marginalized populations. Black Panther’s success lies in its address of the issue of race and gender and the hierarchy of control vested in the various players in the Anthropocene.

However, the film’s solution to the planetary challenges such as climate change and resource consumption leaves a lot to be desired. “The crisis of climate change calls for thinking simultaneously on both registers, to mix together the immiscible chronologies of capital and species history” (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 220). Comprehensive solutions to the challenges of the Anthropocene will require a more introspective approach to human patterns of exploitation, production and consumption, which are only partially analyzed in the various players’ attempt to control the resource of vibranium in the movie.

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