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Black Panther Transmedia: The Revolution Will Not Be Streamed

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ABSTRACT

The 2018 film *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler) is a spectacular display of Blackness on all levels of its production. But the film also tells the fairy tale of an extractive utopia in which technology is second nature, while the exploitation of bodies and ecosystems inherent to its high-tech mining economy remains unseen, much like in an Apple commercial. Only in light of the wider Black Panther transmedia universe (the comics authored by Ta-Nehisi Coates, Kendrick Lamar's soundtrack) does the film's superhero texture yield to its full Afrofuturist potential: a speculative view of what Achille Mbembe calls the *Becoming Black of the world*.

Once, the [American] Dream's parameters were caged by technology and by the limits of horsepower and wind. But the Dreamers have improved themselves, and the damming of seas for voltage, the extraction of coal, the transmuting of oil into food, have enabled an expansion in plunder with no known precedent. And this revolution has freed the Dreamers to plunder not just the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself. The Earth is not our creation. It has no respect for us. It has no use for us. And its vengeance is not the fire in the city but the fire in the sky.

—TA-NEHISI COATES, *BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME*¹

¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 150.

Figure 1. Introducing the Black Panther in *Fantastic Four*, no. 52 (Marvel Comics, 1966).

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and the Black Panther figure of Marvel's comic book universe were both created in 1966. There was no direct link, however, between the political organization that Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton launched in October that year and the introduction of the first superhero character of African descent a few months earlier in May, in an issue of *Fantastic Four* (vol. 1, no. 52), which was authored by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (see Figure 1). As Lee states in a 2009 interview:

It was a strange coincidence because, at the time I did the Black Panther, there was a political party in the country—mostly Black people—and they were called The Black Panthers. And I didn't think of that at all! It had nothing to do with our character, although a lot of people thought there was some tie-in. And I was really sorry—maybe if I had to do it over again, I'd given him another name, because I hate that confusion to be caused. But it really had nothing to do with the then-existing Black Panthers.²

The 2018 film *Black Panther* directed by Ryan Coogler also does not make explicit reference to the Black Panther Party. But the film's promotional

2 Quoted in Naomi Clark, "Is There a Connection between the Black Panther Comic Hero and the Black Panther Political Party (Both Created in 1966), or Are the Names Merely Serendipitous," Quora, March 8, 2018, <https://www.quora.com/Is-there-a-connection-between-the-Black-Panther-comic-hero-and-the-Black-Panther-political-party-both-created-in-1966-or-are-the-names-merely-serendipitous/answer/Naomi-Clark-24>.

materials do indirectly invoke the historical reality in which both Black Panthers appeared in the late 1960s cultural air. One of the film's promotional posters depicts T'Challa—the reigning Black Panther—in visual citation of the iconic 1967 portrait of Huey P. Newton, seated on a throne, a rifle in one hand, a spear in the other (a photo that in turn was a mockery of colonialist portraiture). Moreover, one of the film's trailers contains remixed samples of Gil Scott-Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," a track from 1970, which is also the year Black Panther Party membership reached a peak. In this trailer, as the Black Panther flies across the screen, a male voice-over cites the following, tuned to the beat of Vince Staples's "BagBak" (2017):

You will not be able to stay home, brother.
You will not be able to plug in, turn on, and cop out. . . .
The revolution will not be televised. . . .
The revolution will be live.

Marvel thus links its Black Panther universe to the long history of African American struggle. These offhand gestures beg the question of how *Black Panther's* mainstream Afrofuturism holds up to the political activism it invokes. Does the film merely commodify revolutionary discourse, and wouldn't such commodification prevent the film from constituting an "act of civic imagination," as Henry Jenkins has called the film?³ Doesn't *Black Panther's* production by Marvel, a subsidiary of Disney, by definition preempt the film from its claim to politics—especially when recalling the imperative of turn-of-the-1970s Third Cinema that a political film must also be made politically? And how to square *Black Panther's* imagination of a never-colonized Black nation with Achille Mbembe's analysis of "Blackness" as a discursive product of colonization?

Addressing these questions, it is important to acknowledge the wide acclaim *Black Panther* has received from within the African American community. During a special event in Harlem's Apollo Theater, Ta-Nehisi Coates described the film as "*Star Wars* for Black People," sharing with the audience that he "didn't realize how much [he] needed the film, a hunger for a myth that [addressed] feeling separated and feeling reconnected [to Africa]."⁴ Similarly, Tre Johnson writes that *Black Panther's* greatest legacy is that Black viewers find "a cultural oasis that feels like nothing we've seen before."⁵ And as Jenkins observes, *Black Panther* offered "a shared myth desperately needed in the age of Trump: the film inspired many different forms of participatory culture . . . as people fused its iconography into their personal and social

3 Henry Jenkins, "What 'Black Panther' Can Teach Us about the Civic Imagination," *Global-E* 11, no. 27 (May 22, 2018), <https://www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/may-2018/what-black-panther-can-teach-us-about-civic-imagination>.

4 Quoted in Andy Beta, "10 Things We Learned at Ta-Nehisi Coates' 'Black Panther' Cast Talk," *Rolling Stone*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/10-things-we-learned-at-ta-nehisi-coates-black-panther-cast-talk-204025/>.

5 Tre Johnson, "Black Panther Is a Gorgeous, Groundbreaking Celebration of Black Culture," *Vox*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/2/23/17028826/black-panther-wakanda-culture-marvel>.

identity.”⁶ So yes, following its release, *Black Panther* has undeniably manifested itself as a political-cultural event, but this does not, of course, prevent a critical reading of the film.

That critique is the gravitational point of this essay. I argue that, taken on its own, the *Black Panther* film only marginally integrates its offhand promotional references to the history of African American resistance. Despite its multiracial cast and strong female characters, *Black Panther* at the end of the day is built on a conventional Hollywood logic, while its plot purports an anthropocentric American Dream narrative in which humanity masters nature through technology. Yet the film cannot just be considered on its own. The film emerges out of and inscribes itself into a transmedia franchise that in recent decades has evolved as a platform for rethinking African American identity in the post–civil rights era. This has been the case under the authorship of Christopher Priest (who wrote the 1998 *Black Panther* comics volume on which the movie was largely based), Coates (who picked up the comics’ authorship in 2016, starting with *A Nation Under Our Feet*), and Kendrick Lamar (who cocurated the film’s soundtrack, including the hit single “All the Stars,” performed with the American singer SZA). As Coates writes elsewhere, in *Between the World and Me* (2015), the dreamed synergy between nature and technology at the heart of the American Dream is an all-too-human construction torching the planet, socially and literally.⁷ The *Black Panther* film revels in such phantasmagoric synergy, telling a fairy tale of an extractive utopia, while it has no sight for the exploitation of bodies and ecosystems that marks the reality of every mining economy. In that light *Black Panther* is like, say, Apple’s new American Dream, in which technology is posited as second nature and which was equally designed in California. Only when the film is considered in the light of its broader transmedia universe does its superhero texture open to the speculative potential that Michael Gillespie and others have embraced as central to film Blackness. As I will argue in the final section, “The Fire in the Sky,” at those moments *Black Panther* invites its transmedia traveler to think through what Mbembe calls the “*Becoming Black of the world*.”⁸

SPACETIME TRAVELS—FROM THE DJALIA TO OAKLAND, 1992

Black Panther’s closing titles immerse the viewer in animated magic. On SZA’s chorus that “this may be the night that my dreams might let me know / all the stars are closer,” the image morphs back and forth between two-dimensional screen patterns connoting “Africa” and CGI renderings of the film’s most iconic images: from the skyline of Wakanda, imagined as a hidden and never-colonized superpower in East Africa, to the equally outworldly Gwangju Bridge in Busan, South Korea, and from the Black Panther ring to the Djalía, which is where dreams come from. The viewer enters the Djalía, or field of ancestors, for the first time along with T’Challa (Chadwick Boseman) after he has defeated M’Baku (Winston Duke) in ritual combat over Wakan-

6 Jenkins, ““Black Panther.””

7 Coates, *Between the World*, 150.

8 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 1.

Figure 2. Wakanda's techno-hippie street life in *Black Panther* (Marvel Studios, 2018).

da's crown. As T'Challa lies down in the City of the Dead, his back supported by red sand and his hands clenched across his chest, the shaman Zuri (Forest Whitaker) pours into T'Challa's mouth a metallic purple liquid extracted from the heart-shaped herb that enchants Wakanda. Triggered by Zuri's wisdom that the herb will restore T'Challa's powers of the Black Panther, the image yields to the king's memory of his father, T'Chaka (John Kani), including their final exchange in Vienna right before the terrorist attack on T'Chaka. The scene is directly taken from the 2016 film *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo), in which the Black Panther narrative debuted on the movie screen. Back in the present, T'Challa's body is further covered in sand while his soul sinks further in time: the explosion, his father dead in his arms, and then—following a point of view shot from the perspective of T'Challa's closed eyes as his face is now fully covered in sand—the Djalía, which manifests itself as a timeless savannah landscape bathing in a purple glow and where Black panthers are perched in trees. One of the panthers jumps down, morphing into the living memory of T'Chaka. “Baba,” T'Challa says to his father in a mix of Wakandan and English, “tell me how to best protect Wakanda.” On the words of his father's advice, T'Challa wakes up in a jolt. “Breathe,” Zuri speaks. Hard cut to the techno-hippie street life of Wakanda's capital, the Golden City (see Figure 2).

The Djalía was first introduced to the Black Panther universe by Coates in *A Nation Under Our Feet*. In the series' first volume (2016), we encounter T'Challa's sister Shuri. In the comics Shuri once wore the Black Panther suit herself but now finds herself in a state of living dead. As she roams the Djalía, Shuri encounters Ramonda, her mother, who teaches Shuri about Wakanda's pre-metal age. “You have been told,” Ramonda says, “that the might of your country is in its wonderful inventions. . . . But [Wakanda's] secrets are older than any vaunted metal.” Ramonda is referring to Wakanda's founding myth that the nation owes its power to its large reserves of vibranium, noted for its qualities to absorb and release kinetic energy. In the film, in the pre-credit sequence, the viewer who is not already familiar with this myth is filled in through the “story of home” the young T'Challa is told by his father. The latter explains that vibranium has been present in Wakanda's soil since a

Figure 3. Ramona and Shuri in the Djalia, in *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet*, no. 2 (Marvel Comics, 2017).

meteorite struck the African continent, “millions of years ago.” Returning to the encounter between Ramonda and Shuri on the pages of *A Nation Under Our Feet*: as a tropical bird lands on the Queen Mother’s hand, she explains that she is “a griot, a caretaker of all our histories.” Ramonda adds that she fears that Shuri has lost her soul and forgotten the greatest power of all. “And what . . . what is that, Mother?” Shuri asks, while the reader is invited to imagine the drum sounds that suddenly surrounds the two women. “The power of memory,” Ramona responds. “The power of our song” (see Figure 3).⁹

The Djalia is only one of the few elements cherry-picked from Coates’s story line that made it into the movie. Whereas *A Nation Under Our Feet* over the course of its three volumes challenges received truths about Wakanda, the film follows a more conventional story line that at once copies, expands, and at points deviates from the Black Panther story universe. That universe began with the superhero’s introduction in *Fantastic Four*, no. 52, followed by subsequent guest appearances at the side of Captain America in *Tales of*

9 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Marvel, 2017).

Suspense (1968). The universe continued with the Black Panther's teaming up with other American superheroes in *The Avengers* (1968) and guest appearances in *Daredevil* (1969) and *Astonishing Tales* (1971). It went on with T'Challa's first starring features in the unfortunately titled *Jungle Action* (1973) and the ensuing and much acclaimed *Jungle Action: Panther's Rage* (1973–1976) and *Jungle Action: Panther vs. the Klan* (1976).¹⁰ In 1977 this led to the eponymously titled 1977 *Black Panther* series, which has subsequently been authored by Jack Kirby and Ed Hannigan (vol. 1, 1977–1979); Peter B. Gillis (vol. 2, 1988); Christopher Priest (vol. 3, 1998–2003); Reginald Hudlin and Jonathan Maberry (vols. 4 and 5, 2005–2009, on which Marvel's 2010 *Black Panther* motion comic television series, also written by Hudlin, was based); David Liss (*Black Panther: The Man Without Fear*, 2010–2011, and *The Most Dangerous Man Alive*, 2010–2012); Ta-Nehisi Coates (vol. 6, subtitled *A Nation Under Our Feet*, and after that *Avengers of the New World*, 2016–2018); the Afrofuturist writer Nnedi Okorafor (*Black Panther: Long Live the King*, 2017–2018); and, in various spinoffs, Roxane Gay together with Coates (*World of Wakanda*, 2017), Yona Harvey (*Black Panther & The Crew: We Are the Streets*, 2017), and Evan Narcisse (*Rise of the Black Panther*, 2018).

For the most part, the film picks up on the story arcs developed in Don McGregor's *Panther's Rage* and the thirty-five-issue run of *Black Panther* authored by Priest. But the film also modifies characters and character relations. On the one hand, the Black Panther mythology is a *transmedia* story, defined by Jenkins as a story that “unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.”¹¹ It is “the art of worldmaking” for an age of streaming media, one may add.¹² On the other hand, the film's relation to the comics takes the more classical form of adaptation, in which the film comes second to the original, combining and also modifying elements, either because of authorial choice or to make the film more salient to a mainstream audience.

Following the film's opening with T'Chaka's story of home, *Black Panther* cuts to 1992. We're in Oakland; on TV a live broadcast of the Rodney King protests of that year, following the acquittal of the LAPD officers who assaulted King a year earlier. In a realist style resonant with the broadcast, as well as with Coogler's earlier film *Fruitvale Station* (2013)—about the killing of the twenty-two-year-old Oscar Grant by a Bay Area Rapid Train (BART) police officer—*Black Panther*, still in pre-opening credits, shows a group of young boys playing basketball amid gray apartment complexes. It's already dark, a crate serves as a makeshift hoop, and on the speakers there's the distant beat of Too \$hort's “In the Trunk,” a track from that year. The camera follows the ball, which hits the mark, but as the ball drops down, the camera continues to swirl up, to a bluish light traveling the clouded night sky. Cut to the interior of an apartment, which belongs to N'Jobu (Sterling K. Brown),

10 *Panther's Rage* is “the first comic that was created from start to finish as a complete novel.” See Jason Sacks, “Panther's Rage: The First Marvel Graphic Novel,” Fanboy Planet, <http://www.fanboyplanet.com/comics/js-panthersrage.php>.

11 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 21, 97–98.

12 Jenkins, 21.

T'Chaka's younger brother. On the TV still the Rodney King protests. On the table are automatic weapons, a map, and a BART schedule. Before the camera is able to fully reveal the scheme, there is a knock on the door. "It's these two Grace Jones-looking chicks," N'Jobu's partner James says, as he looks through the peephole. Enter two female guards in African dress, followed by the Black Panther in full superhero guise, piercing the film's thus far realist veneer. The viewer learns that N'Jobu has betrayed Wakanda in an attempt to liberate oppressed people all across the globe. As T'Chaka orders N'Jobu's arrest, the film cuts back to the kids outside, stunned with awe by the aircraft vanishing in the night. Later, it is revealed that N'Jobu was not on the aircraft but was instead killed by T'Chaka after drawing his gun on James, who turns out to be Zuri. It also turns out that one of the kids was N'Jobu's son Erik, soon introduced as the film's antagonist Killmonger. Here the pre-credit sequence ends, and the film shifts to the present, as its mix of adaptation and transmedia storytelling has now completed its initial mission of associating the Black Panther fiction with the historical reality of the injustice that is the focus of the Black Lives Matter movement.

HUMANISM IN AN AFROFUTURIST GUISE

We then travel to Wakanda, for outsiders one of the poorest countries in the world, but behind its façade of peasant life and inhabitable mountain ranges, a marvel of magnetic trains, vegetated high-rises, and wearable tech. "Is this Wakanda?" Chief Intelligence Agency agent Everett Ross (Martin Freeman) asks as one of the first white people waking up in Wakanda. "No, it's Kansas," Shuri (Letitia Wright) responds. At second sight, Wakanda combines "the best of Africa"—its nature, its music, its *joie de vivre*—with science fiction, which is why the film has been received as an Afrofuturist text. And yes, if one forgets for a minute that the Black Panther throne is decided on by ritual combat in which the best man (and occasionally woman) may win and the other is thrown off a cliff, then Wakanda is an Afrofuturist utopia: a synthesis of technology and tradition, history and future, a world also in which identity is in constant flux and in which traditionally received perceptions of "Africa" are challenged. As Mbembe writes in his 2014 essay, "Afrofuturisme et devenir-nègre du monde" (Afrofuturism and the Becoming Black of the world), Afrofuturism integrates literary fantasy, science fiction, music, and arts "to rewrite the Black experience of the world in terms of more or less continuous metamorphoses, of multiple inversions, including anatomic plasticity, of a corporeality in need of machines."¹³ Such, indeed, is the world of Wakanda.

But Mbembe also argues that Afrofuturism is an anti-humanism that disavows the modern notion of humanity modeled on a white, Western, male subject—and that

rejects straightaway the humanist postulate to the extent in which humanism can only constitute itself by the relegation of another subject or entity (living or inert) to the mechanical status of an object or an accident. Afrofuturism doesn't content itself with denouncing

13 Achille Mbembe, "Afrofuturisme et devenir-nègre du monde," *Politique africaine* 136 (2014): 121–33, 126 (translation mine).

the illusions of the “properly human.” In its eyes, it is the idea of the human species that is challenged by the Black experience [*expérience Nègre*]. Produced in a history of predation, the Black person [*le Nègre*] is effectively that human who will have been forced to put on the outfits of the thing and to share the destiny of the object. In doing so, he would carry in himself the tomb of the human form [*le tombeau de l’homme*]. He would be the phantom that haunts the Western humanist delirium.¹⁴

In other words, Afrofuturism, for Mbembe, is a posthumanism that—in resonance with Michel Foucault’s prophecy at the end of *The Order of Things* (1966)—emerges from the “Death of man” (as according to Foucault the human form is a modern invention).¹⁵

In contrast with this critical Afrofuturism, the *Black Panther* film remains stuck in the humanist delirium, for three reasons. First, despite its Afrofuturist feel, Wakanda is modeled on a binary opposition between mankind and a nature that has supposedly been mastered. The Black Panther is the savior hero who embodies the reconciliation of nature and humanity by means of technology, which is presented as second nature. Second, as the film proceeds, the white male gaze of Agent Ross gains prominence. Through him, the viewer is led further into Wakanda’s secrets. This point of critique requires some immediate nuance. By focalizing part of the narrative through Ross, Coogler’s adaptation closely follows Priest’s *Black Panther* comic run. After Ross first appeared in a 1998 issue of *Ka-Zar*, Priest brought back the character as an ally of T’Challa in *Black Panther*, vol. 3. In an interview, Priest revealed that he created the character of Ross to function as the “audience’s surrogate.” With Ross, he could “bridge the gap between the African culture and the Black Panther mythos it is steeped in and the predominantly white readership that Marvel sells to.”¹⁶ In the film, Ross equally serves this bridging function. This does not take away from the fact that the character represents the US government quite one-dimensionally in its fight against the radical ideal of Black liberation.

The third way *Black Panther* subscribes to a humanist outlook is found midway through the final credits. Cutting short “All the Stars,” the film returns to the United Nations building in Vienna, where T’Challa announces that Wakanda will end its vacation from history. Ross’s supportive gaze sutures the viewer into the scene. “Now, more than ever,” T’Challa declares in his speech, “we must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe.” Question from the audience: “With all due respect . . . what can a nation of farmers have to offer to the rest of the world?” Ross and T’Challa share a knowing smile, upon which the film cuts back to the credits. *Black Panther* thus leaves the viewer with a universalist humanism that somewhat neutralizes its already watered-down Afrofuturism. Mbembe writes that Afrofuturism cannot be separated from a critique of capitalism, including its fabrication of the opposi-

14 Mbembe, 125 (translation mine).

15 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1971; New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 387.

16 Ethan Sacks, “The Unsung Heroes: Blade & Co. Help to Close Racial Divide,” *Daily News*, March 19, 2002.

tion “human” versus “Black.” Through its fiction of a never-colonized African superpower that brings the human race together, *Black Panther* bypasses the colonial history of the universalist notion of a “human race.” In itself, that bypassing can still be understood from within an Afrofuturist imagination. My critique of *Black Panther* is that the quest for humanity that progresses its plot is modeled on a rather conventional Hollywood logic.

KILLMONGER AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Historians conjured the Dream. Hollywood fortified the Dream.

—TA-NEHISI COATES, *BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME*¹⁷

Similar to Mbembe’s analysis of Blackness as a product of capitalism, Coates’s *Between the World and Me* discusses race as a “modern invention.” In this book addressed to his adolescent son, Coates formulates a fierce critique of an inherently racist America. “For so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But . . . the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies.”¹⁸ In its humanism, the *Black Panther* movie subscribes to, rather than challenges, the American Dream. This becomes most explicit in the film’s dealings with its antihero, Erik Stevens, called N’Jadaka in Wakandan, and better known as Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan). Killmonger is *Black Panther*’s most complex character. In Marvel’s comics universe, he is first introduced in a 1976 issue of *Jungle Action*, in which he ravages Wakandan villages to attract the Black Panther’s attention. In the film, we first encounter him in the Museum of Great Britain, where he interrogates the curator about the stolen African artifacts on display. Erik grew up an orphan, with his father Prince N’Jobu killed by T’Chaka and his mother having died in prison, after her arrest for a crime she hadn’t committed. Swearing to continue his father’s mission to deploy Wakanda’s resources to liberate oppressed people all over the world, Killmonger travels to Wakanda to exercise his birthright to challenge the ruling Black Panther. “I want the throne. . . . Must feel good. It’s like 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.”

Killmonger is driven, all at once, by revenge for his father, anger about global injustice, a revolutionary zeal of Black liberation, but also mere lust for power. “The sun will never set on the Wakandan empire,” he says as he mounts the throne in a shot that, in inverted citation of the Newton portrait referred to earlier, starts flipped upside down and canted. This lust for empire mixed into Killmonger’s in-itself-reasonable critique of Wakanda’s aristocratic rule permits the film to qualify him as an antagonist. Reading *Black Panther*’s narrative through the lens of the pathos it seeks to stir in the viewer, the film skillfully moves the viewer between sympathy and antipathy toward Killmonger. Sympathy toward his insistence that Wakanda intervene in world politics. Antipathy when he defeats T’Challa. Sympathy when

¹⁷ Coates, *Between the World*, 102.

¹⁸ Coates, 11.

he travels to the Djalia, this time taking the form of the humble Oakland apartment from the pre-credit scene, where Erik now speaks to his father who appears from beyond the grave. Antipathy again when after jolting back from eternity, Killmonger orders the remainder of the heart-shaped herb to be burned. And sympathy when Killmonger is mortally wounded in the second leg of his ritual combat with T'Challa. Of course, N'Jadaka could still be saved, T'Challa also suggests so, but N'Jadaka refuses to be saved, in an exchange that forms the cathartic high point of the film. "Just bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships, because they knew death was better than bondage."

The thing is, N'Jadaka *has* to die, not for reasons internal to his complex character but because of the film's quest for closure. *Black Panther* upholds the male quest logic of the American Dream as its thematic structure. The viewer follows T'Challa in his fairly linear search for the right way to rule, as well as for romantic love, because in accordance with Hollywood convention, the film interweaves a minimal romantic plotline through its main quest motif. Killmonger cannot be part of that resolution. Instead, the film gradually resolves the emotions Killmonger evokes in the viewer while it redeems T'Challa as the moral hero. First, there is T'Challa's second journey to the Djalia, through which the film resolves the guilt of N'Jobu's death that T'Challa has inherited from his father. Second, there is the conversation between T'Challa and Killmonger right before the latter's death, allowing the viewer to sympathize with Killmonger one last time. Third, there is the interaction between T'Challa and a young boy in Erik's Oakland neighborhood, where Wakanda is now building an outreach center. In the *Black Panther* sequel announced for 2022, the boy might be revealed as Killmonger's son, but whether or not he is, the scene signifies the reconciliation between Wakanda and the African American community. Finally, through this outreach center as well as T'Challa's earlier-cited mid-final credit speech, the film reconciles Killmonger's radical politics with Wakanda's aristocratic rule. In doing so, however, the film de facto neutralizes that radical politics, affirming a belief in the American Dream's ability to—in paraphrase of Audre Lorde—repair the house with the master's tools.¹⁹

Killmonger's story arc is thus curbed by superpower; yet when read against the grain, his tragedy also lays bare that superpower's limitations. In the comics, Killmonger eats from the heart-shaped herb and ends up in a coma because the herb only jives with those of royal descent. In the film, the herb doesn't discriminate (see Figure 4). Yet whereas the herb is supposed to bring wisdom and intuition, it leaves Killmonger even more angry and power-hungry, more *human*. The herb, then, is a mere drug that amplifies preexisting character inclinations. Here *Black Panther* comes closest to wisdom and intuition by expressing, through Killmonger's uncontained anger, that in light of colonial history, wisdom and intuition are, perhaps, not reasonable.

19 Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 114–123, 123.

Figure 4. The heart-shaped herb: magic medicine or mere drug? (*Black Panther*, Marvel Studios, 2018).

BLACK PANTHER POLITICS

In the comics, Killmonger grew up in Harlem, but the film transposes the American story line to Oakland. As Doreen St. Félix observes in the *New Yorker*, it is impossible not to read Coogler's Killmonger as a resurrection of *Fruitvale Station*'s Oscar Grant, also played by Jordan.²⁰ In combination with his revolutionary discourse of Black liberation, Killmonger's Oakland upbringing implies an association with the Black Panther Party absent from the comic book character. To return to the coincidental emergence of that party and Marvel's superhero—who in Kirby's original design was named Coal Tiger—perhaps there *is* an explanation for this serendipity. In 1965, the civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael and his student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee started in Alabama at the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). The goal was to offer a counterweight to an all-white local Democratic Party in a county that was 80 percent African American and that had a long history of racial violence and voter suppression.²¹ The LCFO chose as its symbol a Black panther, to take down the local Democratic Party's white rooster. An LCFO poster of that year juxtaposes the rooster to its panther, seemingly to ask, is this the party you want, or this, a party that includes Black people in the promise of "one man—one vote"?²² The next year, Car-

20 Doreen St. Félix, "On Killmonger, the American Villain of 'Black Panther,'" *New Yorker*, February 20, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/on-killmonger-black-panther-s-american-villain>.

21 In 1965, Lowndes, which was 80 percent Black, had 5,122 eligible Black voters, but not one of them was registered. See Hasan Kwame Jeffries, "Lowndes County and the Voting Rights Act," Zinn Education Project, accessed February 11, 2021 <https://www.zinnproject.org/materials/lowndes-county-and-the-voting-rights-act/>.

22 See Benjamin Hedin, "From Selma to Black Power," *The Atlantic*, March 6, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2015/03/from-selma-to-black-power/386989/>.

michael spoke about his organization to an audience that included Seale and Newton, inspiring them to form the Black Panther Party. While it is unclear whether Lee and Kirby were aware of the political developments in Alabama when they created *Fantastic Four*, it is also not unlikely, given the national coverage the LFCO received. In December 1965, for example, the *New York Times* reported that an “all-Negro ‘third party’” in Alabama would “operate in only one county and use a black panther as its party symbol.”²³

Whether or not there ultimately is a direct link between both black panthers, Marvel Comics tried to steer clear of any direct association with the Black Panther Party. In a 1972 issue of *Fantastic Four*, still edited by Lee, T’Challa even changes his moniker to the Black Leopard, explaining that he plans to return to the United States, where the “term [Black Panther] has political connotation,” adding that “T’Challa is a law unto himself” (see Figure 5).²⁴ This does not mean that *Black Panther* steered clear of politics. While T’Challa is kept at a self-aware distance from the Black Panther Party, he does occasionally intervene in the political reality in which the comics circulated, aligning his politics with the civil rights and Black Power movements. In the same issue of *Fantastic Four*, T’Challa and his superhero colleagues Johnny Storm and Ben Grimm (also known as the Thing and the Human Torch) destroy a structure with segregated entrances for “Europeans” and “Coloreds.” And in 1976, in the *Jungle Action* volumes authored by McGregor, the Black Panther—back again to his old moniker—travels to Georgia to take on the Ku Klux Klan. Marvel abandoned the story arc halfway through, after being confronted with resistance from certain groups and allegedly even receiving death threats at its offices.²⁵

Following the *Jungle Action*’s discontinuation in 1972, co-creator Jack Kirby took over the Black Panther character for what would become the first of several *Black Panther* volumes. The most classical of these volumes is the one authored by Priest, the first African American author at one of the two major comics publishers (Marvel and DC). Priest reinvented the character, shrouded him in political intrigue and neo-noir mystique, and reintegrated older story arcs, such as the antagonism with Killmonger. Whereas the character was previously written as a superhero, Priest, as Coates observes, “thought that Black Panther was a *king*.”²⁶ Crucially, T’Challa is not the central focalizer of Priest’s *Black Panther*; Agent Ross is. In the first issue of *Black Panther*, vol. 3, Ross is introduced while seated, without pants, on the toilet, calling himself the “Emperor of Useless White Boys.”²⁷ Abraham Riesman

23 Gene Roberts, “Student Rights Group Lacks Money and Help but Not Projects,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1965, <https://www.nytimes.com/1965/12/10/archives/student-rights-group-lacks-money-and-help-but-not-projects.html>.

24 Roy Thomas (writer), *Fantastic Four*, no. 119 (Marvel, February 1972), 13–14.

25 Graeme McMillan, “The Confused Politics behind Marvel’s Black Panther: A Brief History,” *Hollywood Reporter*, September 23, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/black-panther-confused-politics-a-826671>.

26 Quoted in Abraham Riesman, “The Man Who Made Black Panther Cool,” *Vulture*, January 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/01/christopher-priest-made-black-panther-cool-then-disappeared.html>.

27 “The Client,” *Black Panther*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Marvel, November 1998).

Figure 5. Introducing the Black Leopard in *Fantastic Four*, no. 119 (Marvel Comics, 1972).

cites Priest recalling an exchange he had with Marvel editor Joe Quesada when the latter courted him for the series:

[Priest] was less than enthused. "I was a little horrified when the words 'Black' and 'Panther' came out of Joe's mouth," he would later write. "I mean, Black Panther? Who reads Black Panther? Black Panther?!" But they were adamant, and Priest acquiesced—with "one basic stipulation: *Black Panther* could not be 'a Black book.'" Even though he had become the best interpreter of race in the game, Priest saw something troubling happening to his career. "I stopped being a writer, or being thought of as a writer," he tells me, "and started being thought of as a *black* writer."²⁸

Following volumes 4 and 5, authored by Hudlin and Maberry, Coates took over the authorship of *Black Panther*. In 2015, Coates writes in *The Atlantic* about the inclusivity of comics:

28 Riesman, "Man."

One reason why I still enjoy books, including comic books, is that there's still more room for a transgressive diversity. . . . Outside of hip-hop, it was in comics that I most often found the aesthetics and wisdom of my world reflected. . . . [C]omics have their own issues—like, really big, awful gender issues. But one reason I'm always cautious about the assumption that everything is improved by turning it into a movie is that the range of possibility necessarily shrinks. I'd frankly be shocked if we ever see a Storm [who is the first major female character of African descent, introduced by Marvel in 1975], in all her fullness and glory, in a film.²⁹

In *A Nation Under Our Feet*, Coates revolutionized the world of Black Panther. In the first pages we meet a broken king who has lost his soul and his way. Meanwhile Wakanda, long beleaguered by external forces, is now also an internally divided nation, as T'Challa is confronted by an uprising of a terrorist group named the People. In Coates's take on Wakanda, T'Challa is no longer the unambiguous hero of the story. In the words of Zenzi, who is one of the insurgence leaders, "the people don't *hate* their king. . . . They are *ashamed* of him."³⁰ Blinded, T'Challa prepares for war. "We are Wakanda. We will not be terrorized," he speaks to his council, "We are terror itself." Coates thus crosses the borders of the superhero genre. This is not a narrative in search of resolution but one that develops ever richer understandings of characters, groups, and sides of conflict. Occasionally narrative even gives way altogether, opening up to what Gilles Deleuze has called the time-image, in which plot progression breaks down.³¹ Think here of T'Challa's inner encounters with his sister Shuri as she wanders the realm of the living dead, rendered in a translucent greenish blue. Or of the book's time travels through the Djalia, where, in the words of Deleuze's account of modern cinema, "what was, what is, and again shall be" blend together in "a bit of time in the pure state."³²

In the *Black Panther* movie, the time openings from *A Nation Under Our Feet* remain subordinated to a strict Hollywood logic. In difference from Coates's narrative, and somewhat at odds with the film's offhand promotional references to a revolution that won't be televised, *Black Panther* leaves the superhero logic intact. Clearly, this is a cinema of the action image, as Deleuze calls the logic that rules Hollywood convention.

Does this prevent *Black Panther* from being a political film? This depends, of course, on one's notion of political cinema. In 1969, the Argentine cinema activists Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino published their "Towards a Third Cinema" manifesto, calling for a guerrilla cinema of decolonization that revolutionizes its viewers.³³ In the same vein, a year

29 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Broad, Inclusive Canvas of Comics," *The Atlantic*, February 3, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/02/the-broad-inclusive-canvas-of-comics/385080/>.

30 Coates, *Black Panther*.

31 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.

32 Deleuze, 82.

33 Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World," in *New*

later Jean-Luc Godard published a manifesto “Que faire?” (“What Is to Be Done?”), which calls for political films that are made politically.³⁴ Godard also made some attempts at Third Cinema himself, including the 1968 *Sympathy for the Devil*, which intercuts the Rolling Stones in their London studios with outdoor shots of Black Panther members reading from revolutionary texts while tossing rifles.³⁵ As far as the Black Panther Party’s own use of cinema is concerned, the most significant example is the *Black Panther* news-reel film shot in 1969 in Oakland, which the party screened to promote its cause. Following a Third Cinema aesthetics, the film’s opening is jarring. On the sound of drums, the film shows a montage sequence of the windows of its party’s offices smashed by police bullets, followed by an interview with Newton from jail. “In America,” Newton speaks, “the police . . . are there to contain us, to brutalize us, to murder us, because they have their orders to do, just like the soldiers in Vietnam.”³⁶ Finally, a film worth mentioning here is *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966). The party took this Third Cinema classic as an inspiration for its urban guerrilla film, even leading the film to be introduced as evidence by the American state during its trial of the Panther 21 in 1970.³⁷

Clearly, Marvel’s *Black Panther* film contrasts starkly with these forms of political cinema that interpellate their audiences as revolutionary subjects. Following the categorization proposed by Solanas and Getino, *Black Panther* is above all a product of “first cinema,” in that it’s the product of an industry that addresses its audience as consumers, and, to some extent, it’s also a form of “second cinema,” an auteur film in the tradition of cinema as art.³⁸ It would be too reductive, though, to consider *Black Panther*—a predominantly Black film made in a predominantly white system—just in the light of those criteria. Here I follow Michael Boyce Gillespie’s definition of “Black film” as a cinema that has “Black visual and expressive culture as its signifying core.”³⁹ In *Film Blackness* (2016), Gillespie argues against an approach to Black film that evaluates a film’s politics according to its realist reflection of the Black experience. In contrast to this social reflectionist approach prescriptive of what a Black cinema should do, Gillespie posits his notion of film Blackness as an open negotiation between film as art and the discursivity of race. It’s an approach to Black cinema above all interested in what that cinema can generate. Gillespie thus asks, “What if Black film could be something other than embodied? What if Black film could

Latin American Cinema, Volume 1: Theory, Practices, and Transcontinental Articulations, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 33–58.

34 Jean-Luc Godard, “What Is to Be Done?,” *Afterimage* 1 (April 1970).

35 In that same year there was also Agnès Varda’s documentary *Black Panthers* (1968), which captured the Oakland protests following the arrest of Huey P. Newton.

36 See “Black Panther: A News Reel Video,” *Rediscovering Black History*, February 23, 2016, <https://rediscovering-black-history.blogs.archives.gov/2016/02/23/black-panther-a-news-reel-video/>.

37 Edith Evans Asbury, “‘Battle of Algiers’ Is Presented at Black Panthers’ Trial Here,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1970, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/11/06/archives/battle-of-algiers-is-presented-at-black-panthers-trial-here.html>.

38 Solanas and Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema,” 42.

39 Michael Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 157.

be speculative or just ambivalent? . . . What if Black film is art and not the visual transcription of the Black lifeworld?⁴⁰

What does this imply for *Black Panther*? Ramzi Fawaz argues that the Black Panther's "political and affective force . . . lies in the spectacular visibility of Blackness at every level of the film's production and circulation": its cast, its set and costume design, and its crew. To this one can add the film's many shooting locations in Atlanta, which *Ebony* in 1971 dubbed as "the black mecca of the south," and which since *Black Panther* has been known as "the real Wakanda."^{41 42} Fawaz admits that when read in realist terms, the film's imagination of a separatist Black utopia is the opposite of progressive. Instead, he argues, the film's conceptual success lies in "its ability to project Blackness into new realms of aspirational fantasy rather than to offer an accurate rendering of a global Black experience."⁴³

I largely agree. Considered in the light of the film's projection of Blackness, it is perhaps of less importance, indeed, that *Black Panther* adapts and even somewhat exploits the language of a revolutionary politics than that it explicitly speaks that language. As such the question of *Black Panther's* politics is comparable to that of early 1970s blaxploitation cinema, a wave of low- to mid-budget genre films made with predominantly African American casts marketed at a young Black audience. As Ed Guerrero writes in *Framing Blackness* (1993), these films were made possible by a surge in African American identity politics, which translated into "a large Black audience thirsting to see their full humanity depicted on the commercial cinema screen."⁴⁴ In this same period, and equally spurred by Black nationalism, the figures of Black Panther and Luke Cage (another Black Marvel comic character) rose to prominence, challenging hegemonic notions of what is possible in mainstream culture. While these Black superheroes challenged some narratives, they reinforced others, especially in terms of gender, individual agency, and citizenship. As Rebecca Wanzo argues, "the *Black Panther* comic book often

40 Gillespie, 157.

41 Phyl Garland, "Atlanta: Black Mecca of the South," *Ebony*, August 1971.

42 See, for example, Michael Harriot, "Atlanta Is the Real Wakanda," *The Root*, February 19, 2019, <https://www.theroot.com/atlanta-is-the-real-wakanda-1832715696>.

43 Ramzi Fawaz, "Legions of Superheroes: Diversity, Multiplicity, and Collective Action against Genocide in the Superhero Comic Book," *Social Text* 36, no. 2 (137) (2018): 21–55, 30.

44 Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 69. A quintessential example here is *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), written and directed by Melvin Van Peebles and "starring the Black community." The film tells the story of a Black sex worker on the run after he has beaten unconscious two Los Angeles Police Department officers, who were targeting a member of the Black Panther Party. The film was lauded by Newton, who made it required viewing for party members. While *Sweetback* thematizes its Blackness, most other films associated with the blaxploitation genre are less outspoken in their politics, merely tapping into stereotypes of crime and drug use among African Americans and sailing along on the tide of Black nationalism. In the words of Zak Cheney-Rice, "the revolution, it seemed, would be monetized." At the same time, he acknowledges that films such as *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971), *Super Fly* (Gordon Parks Jr., 1972), and *Coffy* (Jack Hill, 1973) created self-contained Black worlds with self-determined Black protagonists, thereby expanding the domain of the visible. See Zak Cheney-Rice, "Is Marvel's 'Black Panther' the Endgame of the Revolution that Blaxploitation Started?," *Mic*, February 6, 2018, <https://www.mic.com/articles/187760/is-marvels-black-panther-the-endgame-of-the-revolution-that-blaxploitation-started>.

plays with the notion that Black superheroes are unimaginable . . . but such narratives still often depend on glossing over the nature of power dynamics in the state by privileging muscular power as the ideal fantasy of agency.”⁴⁵ The same can be said about the *Black Panther* film, which, as stated, follows a fairly conventional logic. While I agree with Fawaz that this logic doesn’t prevent the film from projecting Blackness into new realms, and while acknowledging the film’s reception as a civic text, I would also argue that this classical narrative logic limits the film’s speculative potential. For that potential to manifest itself most poignantly, the film has to be considered intertextually, in its conversation with Coogler’s earlier *Fruitvale Station* and above all in the context of the film’s broader transmedia universe.

Over the decades, and despite *Black Panther*’s initial cultural appropriation of “Africa” and the continued centrality of its male superhero, that universe has evolved as a treasure trove of winding plots and imaginations, in which, especially under the authorship of Coates and Gay, the superhero logic occasionally gives way to more experimental forms of narration. As Dan Hassler-Forest argues in dialogue with Steven Shaviro, in its most critical forms, transmedia storytelling builds worlds where “the very sense of what it means to be a self or subject at all” breaks down.⁴⁶ Whenever that happens, transmedia worlds become time-spaces in which meaning is allowed to be multiple and characters develop across platforms as they are constructed—at once created and interpreted—by different authors. In other words, transmedia storytelling is a world-building for posthuman times, in which the subject increasingly breaks down into a scattered and shattered *dividual*. Such a deconstruction of the subject does not happen in the *Black Panther* film, but it happens when the reader follows T’Challa in his travels from the movie screen back to the comics and also to the soundtrack and music videos curated and performed by Lamar. As Zak Cheney-Rice writes about blaxploitation, working with artists like James Brown, Curtis Mayfield, and Marvin Gaye, this cinematic genre presented new ways of looking at the soundtrack. Lamar’s involvement in the *Black Panther* soundtrack continues that tradition.⁴⁷

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

The music video for “All the Stars,” directed by Dave Meyers and the Little Homies, is in loose conversation with the *Black Panther* film. While Lamar roams with Black panthers like T’Challa in the Djalía, SZA sings her chorus immersed in an Africa-shaped galaxy—also seen at the start of the film—where “all the stars are closer” (see Figure 6). Throughout, the video is a love letter to African fashion and art. The homage actually caused a bit of a controversy. Lamar and SZA were sued by the British-Liberian artist Lina Iris

45 Rebecca Wanzo, “It’s a Hero? Black Comics and Satirizing Subjection,” in *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics & Sequential Art*, ed. Frances Gateward and John Jennings (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 318.

46 Steven Shaviro, quoted in Dan Hassler-Forest, *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics: Transmedia World-Building beyond Capitalism* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 186.

47 Rice, “Marvel’s ‘Black Panther.’”

Figure 6. “Love, let’s talk about love / Is it anything and everything you hoped for?” (“All the Stars” music video, dir. Dave Meyers and the Little Homies, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2018).

Viktor because the video includes visuals copied from her paintings after she had explicitly refused permission for her work to be used in the *Black Panther* movie. As Taylor Hosking comments in *The Atlantic*, “this was one of the more concrete claims of malpractice that arose amid the larger discussion about appropriation and *Black Panther*.”⁴⁸

Hosking continues that, at the same time, “All the Stars” “brought Afrofuturism . . . roaring back to center stage in hip-hop. The music video proved a meaningful departure from the ways in which many Black artists had been depicting their connection to the African diaspora.”⁴⁹ In terms of storytelling, “All the Stars” may not seem Afrofuturist, at least not in the sense of, say, the transmedia world spinning out of Janelle Monáe’s “Metropolis” (2007). Whereas Monáe and her android alter ego Cindi Mayweather embark on a narrative that weaves “seemingly contradictory strands of autobiography, social commentary, and fantastic world-building into a radically heterogeneous multitenet,” Lamar’s journey through an imagined Africa follows a more straightforward path.⁵⁰ On that path, Lamar, as in much of his music, expresses doubts about his identity in a way that recalls Killmonger. Like Killmonger, Lamar states he grew up in a reality of conflict and institutionalized racism. And also Lamar is not interested in praise from that same society (“Oh you important? You the moral to the story? You endorsin’? Mothafucka, I don’t even like you”). But Lamar doesn’t find a new home in Africa, either.

48 Taylor Hosking, “How a *Black Panther* Music Video Taps into an Old Trend,” *The Atlantic*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/03/all-the-stars-kendrick-lamar-sza-video-afrocentrism-afrofuturism/554306/>.

49 Hosking.

50 Hassler-Forest, *Science Fiction*, 181.

Figure 7. “I fight pain and hurricanes, today I wept” (“Pray for Me” music video, dir. Dave Meyers and the Little Homies, Republic Records, 2018).

The video portrays him as an outsider, or even a trespasser, evoking “the internal conflict many African Americans feel about whether their African-ness is authentic.”⁵¹

This internal conflict plays out even clearer in the other music video that was released around the *Black Panther* film, “Pray for Me,” a collaboration between Lamar and the Canadian singer the Weeknd. The video is an animated interpretation of the *Black Panther* narrative intercut with footage from the film. “I fight the world, I fight you, I fight myself,” Lamar raps, again ventriloquizing Killmonger, while the video shows the face-off between the two Black Panthers. “Just in case my faith go,” the Weeknd sings, “I’ll live by my own law,” voicing T’Challa’s attempt at a society independent from a world order of oppression and exploitation (see Figure 7).

Lamar’s reflections on conflicted identity in “All the Stars” and “Pray for Me” need not only be understood in the context of the Black Panther universe. They are also continuations of his reflections on race and society found in his earlier work, in particular on his 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. In “i,” for example, Lamar blurs the lines between autobiography and autofiction as he stares at himself “in a dirty double mirror.” The song may be taken as a reflection on double consciousness, coined by W. E. B. Du Bois as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” a feeling of “two-ness,” and of being torn by “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings.”⁵² Or, as Mbembe asks in *Critique of Black Reason*, “is [the Black Man] not convinced that he is inhabited by a double, a foreign entity that prevents him from knowing himself? Does he not live in a world shaped by loss and

51 Hosking, “*Black Panther*.”

52 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; Minneapolis: First Avenue Editions, 2016), 3.

separation, cultivating a dream of returning to an identity founded on pure essentialism and therefore, often, on alterity?”⁵³ Lamar’s “i,” and especially the track’s album version, voices exactly that feeling of inner conflict: “I went to war last night / With an automatic weapon, don’t nobody call a medic / . . . I’ve been dealin’ with depression ever since an adolescent.” As always with Lamar, the personal is political.

Lamar’s split “i” resonates with Killmonger and T’Challa at once, with the conflict that plays out between them, and with the inner conflict that unites them, especially when keeping in mind Coates’s portrayal in *A Nation Under Our Feet* of T’Challa as a broken king who has lost his way and his soul. Shifting focus momentarily from the Black Panther universe to Lamar’s (while keeping in mind this split “i” that binds their protagonists), depression is a central theme throughout *To Pimp a Butterfly*. In the poem that ends “Alright,” Lamar recalls how he was “abusing [his] power, full of resentment / Resentment that turned into a deep depression” and that at one point he found himself “screamin’ in the hotel room” as “the evils of Lucy” were all around him (“Lucy” being short for Lucifer, or the devil). In the music video for “Alright” (dir. Colin Tilley and the Little Homies), the poem bookends the song. While the prelude situates the video in an Oakland of burning cars, alcoholism, and police violence, Lamar tells how he “kept running” and that while his loved ones “were fighting a continuous war back in the city,” he “was entering a new one, a war based on apartheid and discrimination.” In between the prelude and conclusion, Lamar is seen floating through the streets, reassuring himself and his community that things “gon’ be alright,” a chorus that has since been adopted as a Black Lives Matter anthem, despite Lamar’s own complicated relationship to this movement.⁵⁴

Lamar floating through the streets of Oakland is indexical of cinema’s same digital era as that in which T’Challa streams across our screens. In her book *Spectacular Digital Effects* (2014), Kristen Whissel writes about cinematic verticality and the defiance of gravity through digital effects: “When verticality is located in the gravity-defying body of a protagonist . . . it often implies a crisis inseparable from his or her problematic relation to the historical, familial, and traditional past. Whereas a protagonist’s upward verticality is frequently associated with a (rebellious) leap toward a new future, the downward verticality of the long fall is inseparable from the rapid approach of an inevitable end.”⁵⁵ Lamar’s fall from a lamppost after he is shot by a policeman’s finger gun mirrors T’Challa’s fall from a cliff after his initial defeat by Killmonger (see Figure 8). Both T’Challa and Lamar keep floating, though, at once despite *and* in their struggle. As Lamar’s body hits the ground, the camera zooms in on his smiling face.

53 Mbembe, *Black Reason*, 7.

54 See, for example, Jamilah King, “The Improbable Story of How Kendrick Lamar’s ‘Alright’ Became a Protest Anthem,” *Mic*, February 11, 2016, <https://www.mic.com/articles/134764/the-improbable-story-of-how-kendrick-lamar-s-alright-became-a-protest-anthem>.

55 Kristen Whissel, *Spectacular Digital Effects: CGI and Contemporary Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 27.

Figure 8. “I remember you was conflicted. . . . Sometimes I did the same” (“Alright” music video, dir. Colin Tilley and the Little Homies, London Alley Entertainment, 2015).

“Alright” appears halfway through the narrative arc of *To Pimp a Butterfly*, marking a turning point in the artist’s dealing with his depression. In “i,” which is the next-to-last track, Lamar is finally able to say he loves himself, “illuminated by the hand of God,” even though this doesn’t mean that he has stopped running for answers, “at a meteor speed.” The track ends on a staged ad-lib a cappella rap triggered by an offstage argument in Lamar’s fictional audience (“Not on my time, kill the music”). In the last verse, Lamar addresses Oprah Winfrey:

So I’m a dedicate this one verse to Oprah
 On how the infamous, sensitive N-word control us

 Well, this is my explanation straight from Ethiopia
 N-E-G-U-S definition: royalty; King royalty—wait listen
 N-E-G-U-S description: Black emperor, King, ruler, now let me finish

 The homies don’t recognize we been using it wrong
 So I’m a break it down and put my game in a song
 N-E-G-U-S, say it with me, or say it no more
 Black stars can come and get me
 Take it from Oprah Winfrey, tell her she right on time
 Kendrick Lamar, by far, realest Negus alive.

With these lines Lamar responds to Winfrey’s critique of the frequent use of the n-word in African American hip-hop. As Lamar states in a 2015 interview around the release of *To Pimp a Butterfly*, he’s not ready to stop using the word and instead continues to reclaim it. In this respect Lamar is on the same page as Jay-Z, who, in a conversation with Winfrey in 2009, states that “my

generation hasn't had the same experience with that word that generations of us before had. . . . I believe that a speaker's intention is what gives a word its power."⁵⁶ Or in the language of cultural studies, *people make meaning*.

In "i" Lamar even goes one step further than meaning-making, in that he rewrites the etymological origin of the n-word, linking it to "Negus," which means "king" or "ruler" in the Ethiopian Semitic languages. Lamar thus literally brings "new concepts to this mad city" that "institutionalizes him," to cite from the poem he reads to his artistic father Tupac Shakur, who—much like the fathers of T'Challa and Killmonger appearing in the *Djalila*—is featured from beyond the grave in the album's magical closing track, "Mortal Man." What is "the result" of this conceptual work on the self? Lamar asks himself. His poetic answer:

Wings begin to emerge . . .
Finally free, the butterfly sheds light on situations
That the caterpillar never considered, ending the internal struggle
Although the butterfly and the caterpillar are completely different
They are one and the same.

The question is, though, what Lamar gains with his conceptual re-rooting of the n-word. While Ethiopia's history of fighting European colonialism may be inspiring (and may have also been an inspiration for Lee's imagination of *Wakanda*), its long dynasty of *negus* (including Haile Selassie, whose 1963 United Nations address resonates in those by T'Chaka and T'Challa) also has a long feudal history of exploiting, enslaving, and murdering the Ethiopian people. As Abel Shifferaw writes in critique of Lamar, "Negus as n---- continues in a long line of fetishizing a historically inaccurate depiction of a monolithically same Africa. . . . Although a difficult task we need to do better in our understanding of the continent, which includes not throwing around pseudo facts or half-truths, so to build a bridge between Africa and its diasporic children in an effort to fight for social, racial and economic justice."⁵⁷ In that respect, Lamar's journey in "All the Stars" offers a more complex reflection on the limitations of retracing one's roots. This is the case precisely because lyrics and images—even though also critiqued for creating a fictional image of Africa—are a reflection on the possibilities and impossibilities of the diasporic subject traveling "home," whether or not in negotiation of a lived experience of being internally split.

In her interview with Jay-Z, Winfrey also raises a second critique of American hip-hop, namely its frequent misogyny. That point of critique remains unaddressed by Jay-Z, and it remains unaddressed by Lamar, whose self-reflexive interventions on race in American society are interspersed with the b-word, as in the video for "Alright," or, for example, bragging about unprotected sex in "These Walls" (musically one of the album's

56 "Jay-Z & Oprah Isn't Dat Great.?", YouTube video, posted by "Mega," April 15, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTLr5DCKUkA>.

57 Abel Shifferaw, "Kendrick Helped Popularize It, But We Need to Talk about the Complicated Ethiopian History of 'Negus,'" *OkayAfrica*, February 17, 2016, <https://www.okayafrica.com/kendrick-lamar-ethiopian-history-negus/>.

highlights). As Roxane Gay writes about Lamar, “I think what’s pernicious about a choice like ‘B---- don’t kill my vibe’ [from his 2012 album *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*] is that we just take it for granted. We hear it so often that it becomes part of the vernacular.”⁵⁸

With Gay we return full circle to the world of Black Panther, or, more precisely, *The World of Wakanda*, as is the title of the Black Panther spin-off. In this comic, Gay teamed up with Coates to develop the backstory of the *dora milaje*, or adored ones, the Black Panther’s personal bodyguards. As we read in the volume’s introduction, in ancient times the *dora milaje* used to be potential wives in training for Wakanda’s ruler, but by the time Gay’s story takes place, conventions have evolved, as illustrated by an opening story about the burgeoning love between the “midnight angels” Ayo and Aneka. Meanwhile, Coates expanded his involvement in Marvel’s comics universe to the story arc of Steve Rogers, aka Captain America. As Coates writes in *The Atlantic*, Rogers is loyal to nothing except the Dream. But why, Coates asks, would anyone actually still believe in the Dream?⁵⁹

One constant factor across manifestations of the American Dream throughout history has been its promise of a world in which people feel whole and at home, a world in which they experience *a sense of belonging*. The Dream is a fiction that contrasts with the feeling of disconnect as described by Lamar on *To Pimp a Butterfly* and by Coates in *Between the World and Me*. Coates presents his new project as an attempt “to put Captain America’s words in [his] head.” After his critical rewriting of Wakanda—which in its initial form authored by Lee projects the American Dream on an imagined Africa—Coates now allows America’s hegemonic self-fiction to become part of his ongoing exploration of American reality. It is a reality whose self-narrative, more than anywhere else in the world, is at odds with and sustains a broken system, in terms of its structural racism and more generally in terms of its exploitation of people and natural resources.

THE FIRE IN THE SKY, OR A SPECULATIVE POSTHUMANISM

Now, for the first time in human history, the term “Black” has been generalized. This new fungibility, this solubility, institutionalized as a new form of existence and expanded to the entire planet, is what I call the *Becoming Black of the world*.

—ACHILLE MBEMBE, *CRITIQUE OF BLACK REASON*⁶⁰

In this final section, *Black Panther* serves as a lens on life in late capitalism and its platform society, in which the digital platform infrastructures

58 Roxane Gay, quoted in Caitlin Thompson, “Roxane Gay: The Bad Feminist’s Guide to Enjoying Hip Hop,” *New Sounds*, November 21, 2014, <https://www.newsounds.org/story/roxane-gay-bad-feminist-hip-hop/>.

59 Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Why I’m Writing *Captain America*,” *The Atlantic*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/02/we-who-love-america/553991/>.

60 Mbembe, *Black Reason*, 6.

controlled by tech corporations such as Google and Facebook infiltrate all domains of life, contributing to what Mbembe calls the “*Becoming Black of the world*.” In Wakanda’s platform society, each individual at birth receives a “Kimoyo” bead made of vibranium to monitor their health. The beads also have healing powers themselves, as becomes clear in the scene in which Shuri stabilizes Agent Ross. Over the course of a Wakandan’s lifetime, their smart-watch-like bracelet that holds this prime bead is expanded with additional beads with different applications, including holographic communication, geo-tracking, and vehicle control. The beads are made by the Wakanda Design Group, led by Shuri. As far as one can tell from the film and the comics, this Design Group has a state-run monopoly on its integrated hardware and software solutions, as well as on the cloud that interconnects Wakanda and that renders it invisible to the outside world.

Projecting this Wakanda Design Group onto Silicon Valley, Apple comes to mind, because of its equally integrated hardware and software solutions, its minimalist lean aesthetics, and its outspoken philosophy of technology as second nature. As Steve Jobs once put it, “it’s in Apple’s DNA that technology alone is not enough, that it’s technology married with the liberal arts, with the humanities, that yields the results that make our heart sing.”⁶¹ Similarly, in Apple’s “Better” commercial Tim Cooks is heard saying that it’s in Apple’s DNA “to leave the world better than we found it,” because for Apple “*better* is a force of nature” (see Figure 9).⁶² While the commercial moves in bird’s-eye view across forests and fields, Cook references the company’s energy-efficient data centers and Apple’s overall intention to reduce its environmental impact.⁶³ It’s the new American Dream, designed in Silicon Valley, of a symbiosis between technology and humanity.

But what if this belief in technology as second nature in fact makes things *worse* for a lot of people, contributing to the socioeconomic segregation within and between communities? What if the belief in sustainable growth, according to which technological innovation goes hand in hand with the protection of ecosystems, in fact contributes to the destruction of those very ecosystems? And what if Silicon Valley’s humanist belief that global heating can be contained with “green” servers and artificial intelligence (e.g., Microsoft’s AI for Earth program, Google’s “dashboard” for the planet) in fact further pokes the fire in the sky that burns “our” planet, to paraphrase Coates? The Silicon Dream could not contrast more starkly with the harsh reality of a globalized platform society in which, as Mbembe writes, “capital, having reached its maximal capability for flight, sets off a process of escalation” while it makes life precarious for many, increasingly casting people out as an unexploitable “superfluous humanity.”⁶⁴ It’s a reality that marks the end of the human form as we knew it. Mbembe continues:

61 Apple, “iPad 2 Keynote,” YouTube March 2, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgSJzGrcT1U>.

62 “Apple Better—HD commercial,” YouTube posted by “The Commercial Cinema,” May 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7ArPgBRR94>.

63 “Apple Better.”

64 Mbembe, *Black Reason*, 3.

Figure 9. “Better is a force of nature” (“Better” commercial, Apple, 2014).

Capital hardly needs [workers] anymore to function. A new form of psychic life is emerging, one based on artificial and digital memory and on cognitive models drawn from the neurosciences and neuroeconomics. With little distinction remaining between psychic reflexes and technological reflexes, the human subject becomes fictionalized as “an entrepreneur of the self.” . . . This new man . . . is a neuroeconomic subject absorbed by a double concern stemming from his animal nature . . . and his thingness As a *human-thing*, *human-machine*, *human-code*, and *human-in-flux*, he seeks above all to regulate his behavior according to the norms of the market. . . . Condemned to lifelong apprenticeship, to flexibility, to the reign of the short term, he must embrace his condition as a soluble, fungible subject to be able to respond to what is constantly demanded of him: to become another.⁶⁵

As observed earlier in relation to Mbembe’s discussion of Afrofuturism, this posthuman is what becomes of the subject following the death of the human form, for better or worse. The posthuman is a subject who is inherently scattered and shattered to the extent they’re no longer an individual but instead have become what Deleuze has called a *dividual*, a technologically mediated body assemblage of multiple attachments.⁶⁶ In Mbembe’s words, the neoliberal fusion between capitalism and animism transforms humans into “animate things made up of coded digital data.”⁶⁷ Mbembe refers to this neoliberal precaritization of the human condition as the “*Becoming Black of*

65 Mbembe, 3–4.

66 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 180.

67 Mbembe, *Black Reason*, 5.

the world.” He writes that whereas “across early capitalism, the term ‘Black’ referred only to the condition imposed on peoples of African origin,” now the term has been generalized, as people in general, the 99 percent, are increasingly turned into objects. But Mbembe also recognizes the limitations of his post-racial notion of Blackness in a world that is not post-racist, asking himself, “if, by chance, in the midst of this [neoliberal] torment, Blackness survives those who invented it . . . what risks would a Becoming-Black-of-the-World pose to the promise of liberty and universal equality for which the term ‘Black’ has stood throughout the modern period?”⁶⁸

On the one hand, a posthuman ethics thus seeks to think the “Becoming-Black-of-the-World.” It’s an ethics that thinks across modern binaries of race, gender, and sexuality, across the opposition between the organic body and technology also. As such, posthumanism takes inspiration from Lorde’s call to “relate our human differences as equals,” as well as from Paul Gilroy’s *planetary humanism*, a “radically nonracial humanism [that] exhibits a primary concern with the forms of human dignity that race-thinking strips away.”⁶⁹ At the same time, a posthuman ethics needs to acknowledge that the emerging posthuman does not simply succeed its all-too-human “predecessor.” The posthuman enfolds the human, much like the human incorporates pre-human forms of subject formation, according to which people’s life stories, their fates, are determined by forces that transcend empirical observation. The challenge of a posthuman ethics is to at once think difference and think across it. Or, as Rosi Braidotti writes, a critical posthumanism defines the posthuman within “an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable.”⁷⁰ A posthuman ethics engages at once the increasingly universal condition of exploitation under neoliberal capitalism and the lived experience of those oppressed by racism, sexism, and homophobia and who, as articulated by Lamar and Jay-Z, continue to develop, in their resistance, a sense of belonging and meaning-making around modern identity categories.

Such intersectional posthumanism functions, moreover, as a postcolonial ethics for the era of climate chaos. The planet’s future, and posthuman attempts at survival in it, is the subject of speculative fiction, understood as a post-genre that blurs the lines between science fiction and realism, between Earth and outer space. As Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman write, the primary question of speculative fiction is “What if?”⁷¹ *Black Panther* repeatedly ventures into speculation: What if an African country had control over its own resources? What if those resources were used in the name of a planetary humanism rather than feeding a globalized platform society

68 Mbembe, 7.

69 Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” 115; and Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 17.

70 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 49.

71 Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman, “The Black Imagination and the Genres: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative,” in *The Black Imagination, Science Fiction and the Speculative*, ed. Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 2.

Figure 10. *Black Panther's* science fiction of a nation shielded from global heating (Marvel Studios, 2018).

dominated by American and Chinese tech giants? What if the People resisted power, like in the story line of *A Nation Under Our Feet*, which ends with the birth of a republic? In terms of its portrayal of technology as second nature, however, Wakanda resembles Apple's American Dream: a pure fiction in the non-speculative sense, in which, certainly in the *Black Panther* film, the exploitation of human labor and natural ecosystems that defines every extractive economy is left out of sight—much like the cobalt mines and Chinese assembly lines remain unseen in Apple's green utopia. Because had the hidden nation of Wakanda really been on planet Earth, even its vibranium-fueled platform society could not shield itself from global heating, the fire in the sky (see Figure 10).

The imagination of Wakanda thus links up with the dominant fiction of a “humanity” in control, a humanity that is believed to design its way out of climate catastrophe. It's precisely that fiction that has catalyzed, and that continues to catalyze, that very catastrophe, at the ongoing expense of all planetary life. It's a fiction intimately bound up with histories of colonialism and exploitation, and thus with the invention of Blackness as a category. That fiction is continued rather than challenged by recent discourses of the Anthropocene, in which “humanity” is presented as a force of nature. Kathryn Yusoff writes in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018), “As the Anthropocene proclaims the language of species life—*anthropos*—through a universalist geologic commons, it neatly erases histories of racism that were incubated through the regulatory structure of geologic relations. The racial category of Blackness shares its natality with mining the New World.”⁷²

72 Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 2.

Against this geo-logic, Yusoff argues for a critical aesthetics that thinks Blackness “in terms of materiality, of coal black, black gold, black metal,” and that thus uncovers the “transactions between geology and inhumanism as a mode of production.”⁷³ Such a critical aesthetics is only marginally found in the *Black Panther* film, but it is more center stage elsewhere in its transmedia universe, especially in *A Nation Under Our Feet*, when T’Challa moves to the background and the narrative is focalized through the exploited of Wakanda’s mining economy. In those pages the superhero texture gives way to a speculative realism that envisions what revolution could look like: the coming together of people in collective struggle across, yet without crossing out, difference—the emergence of community.

In conclusion, at this writing, speculations have begun about the *Black Panther* sequel, scheduled for release in 2022 and again to be directed by Coogler. With Atlanta-the-real-Wakanda again as the main shooting location, it will be especially interesting to see how the film will position its fictional Wakanda vis-à-vis the post-Trump era. Will the film engage, for example, the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests spurred by the murder of George Floyd? What is certain is that T’Challa won’t return as the ruling Black Panther now that Marvel has announced it won’t recast Boseman after his passing.⁷⁴ It is equally certain that after over half a century of its birth, the Black Panther transmedia stream will continue to spark people’s imagination of a revolutionized American Dream.

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73 Yusoff, 9.

74 Julia Alexander, “Marvel Will Not Recast Chadwick Boseman’s Character in Black Panther 2,” *The Verge*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/12/10/22168835/chadwick-boseman-black-panther-recast-marvel-studios-sequel>.