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Alegropolis: Wakanda and *Black Panther*'s Hall of Mirrors

Ananya Jahanara Kabir

The climax of the film Black Panther *(directed by Ryan Coogler, 2018) shows the two heirs claiming the Black Panther's mantle battling it out in a tunnel that is modernity's dark hull. My article teases out the complex relationship between the film's doubled Black Panthers as a hall of mirrors, where the African American filmmaker and the assembled African and Afro-diasporic cast confront each other, their collective memories of slavery, and the complex relationship of those on the African continent to those memories. What in the structure of cinema might take us out of this hall of mirrors to a futurity beyond trauma? In answer, I offer a reading of Wakanda as "Alegropolis": a lavish and loving cinematic creation that draws on Afro-Futurist play with temporality and technology to reinscribe this circum-Atlantic history within a planetary frame. An affiliative afro-modernity is generated thereby, which invites a global audience to share the film's ethical and emotional concerns as what Michael Rothberg calls "implicated subjects."*

Keywords: African diaspora, collective trauma, Middle Passage, Afro-Futurism, affiliative afro-modernity, implicated temporality

But African-American voices have other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come.

—Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Afro-Futurism 1.0"

Think of yourself, Black creator, freed of european [sic] restraint. … Think what would be the results of the unfettered blood inventor-creator *with the resources of a nation behind him.* To imagine—to think—to construct—to energize!!!

—Amiri Baraka, "Technology and Ethos"

The Afropolitan? Afropolis? At least, the entanglement of the modern and the African.

—Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, "Afropolis: From Johannesburg"

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What cultural and aesthetic forms must Africanity assume today to be meaningful to constituencies whose connection to the African continent and its diasporas may be affiliative as well as filial, structural as well as genealogical, achieved as well as immanent? The cinematic richness of the film *Black Panther* (2018) invites leverage of the micro-level of close reading in order to engage with this question.[1] The film celebrates technology as spectacle, palliative, and panacea, to construct a memorable scenario for its dialogue between Africa and its diasporas even while foregrounding its ambition for a global audience beyond the groups represented by this dialogue. In using Hollywood as the medium for its message, Ryan Coogler, the director of *Black Panther*, in concert with its cast and those responsible for assembling the soundtrack, costumes, and cinematography, signals conscious investment in broadening this conversation to non-African interlocutors. What does this investment signify?

My answer to this question arises from a starting point I consider indispensable to theoretical explorations of our contemporary world: the African continent as furnishing vital nodes in global cultures of taste-making.[2] This repositioning within the planetary frame of Africa (and "Africa,"[3] its oneiric projection on to the plane of representation and memory) must reckon with the traumatic foundational relationship the continent and its peoples have had with global modernity. Thus, my reading focuses on two linked aspects of this film, both fundamental, and, yet, somewhat overlooked in the initial rush of responses it generated: firstly, its investment in the African diaspora's relationship with Africa and Africanity, which I call "the hall of mirrors" effect, and secondly, its transformation of that relationship into cinema with swag, manifested in Wakanda as "Alegropolis," a space marked by and conducive to "alegria." By "alegria," I signal investment in a life-force that salvages traumatic pasts through celebration of the body's resources for remaking the world it inhabits; it is the positive affect attached to the terrible beauty that Saidiya Hartman finds in the "wayward lives" of African American women traversing urban spaces at the dawn of the twentieth century.[4] I argue that this dual remit—a diasporic reengagement with Africanity and a consequent presentation of Wakanda as Alegropolis—underwrites *Black Panther* as a testimony to "black diasporic history [as] a thing of the future, not of the past, a subject of fantasies, dreams, and speculations … created in the process of its recuperation."[5] My article demonstrates that Coogler mines the particular resources of cinema to turn this process of recuperation *outward.* That is to say, he engages not only with the Afro-Atlantic conjuncture, but with the world beyond its affective and historical frame.

1 *Black Panther*. Directed by Ryan Coogler. Burbank, CA: Marvel Studios, 2018. Netflix. The screenplay by Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole is accessible at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a1c2452268b96d901cd3471/t/5c2687b74d7a9c2ebbdb95e9/1546028997301/Black+Panther.pdf.

2 See Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

3 On this phantasm of "Africa," see V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); recent arguments for a planetary repositioning of the African continent include Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017; translated from the French original of 2013).

4 Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2019).

5 Ruth Mayer, " 'Africa As an Alien Future': The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds," *American Studies* 45.4 (2000): 555–66, esp. 561.

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At a key moment in *Black Panther*, the elder Panther T'Chaka directs his son's attention to "the truth I chose to omit." Ostensibly, this statement refers to T'Chaka's concealing from T'Challa the fact that he (T'Chaka) had killed his brother and T'Challa's uncle, N'Jobu, and that the mercenary "Killmonger," who turns up to claim the throne of Wakanda, is actually N'Djaka, N'Jobu's son and T'Challa's cousin.[6] T'Chaka's statement is, however, also a signpost to another truth, whose omission is the aporia around which the narrative is constructed and that has shaped its reception: the fraught relationship between the African diaspora and the African continent refracted through an African American prism. Close reading the film as multi-dimensional product of the imagination, and dwelling on the crafted interplay of these different dimensions (narrative, plot, cinematography, soundtrack, casting), I reveal the formal, philosophical, and political necessity of this aporia, as well as the mobilization of cinematic storytelling to proffer semantic and ethical compensation. *Black Panther* demands a reading technique that excavates the layers of signification that make Afro-Futurism the arena where the African diaspora and the African continent confront each other. "The fictional pact," or fiction's power to suggest possible worlds, and to coax us into accepting this possibility,[7] works with the film's design, soundtrack, and aesthetics, as well as its relationship to the narrative constructed during the many decades that the figure of Black Panther has inhabited the universe of Marvel comics. The film uses these preexistent resources in order to make us imagine, through our senses, another Africa that can and indeed must emerge. In this task, it showcases "the technology of stylization" that characterizes African American cultural production through its signature strategies of "redeployment, reconception, and re-creation."[8]

These antecedents notwithstanding, *Black Panther* represents a key shift in African American cultural production. It harnesses a medium with global reach to transmit an intimate conflict, not between the enslaved and the enslavers, but between the African whose ancestors escaped slavery and the Afro-descendant whose ancestors did not. In deploying the overdetermined signifiers of Afro-Futurism to explore this conflict through a Hollywood blockbuster, Coogler and his team invigorate those signifiers even while opening new restitutive pathways through the ever-present traumas of the Middle Passage. The film levers Afro-Futurism as cinematic spectacle not merely to explore "the wound of history" within the psyche of diasporic Africans,[9] but to stamp with the same wound their African counterparts who are seemingly traversing another trajectory altogether of global modernity—and, indeed, to reimagine the wound as embodied consequence. Through deft mobilization of narrative tools, in particular mirroring, doubling, metonymy, and emplotment, Coogler presents an African American story

6 The film's use of "Killmonger" is a contraction of "Erik Killmonger," the full name borne by this character in the Marvel comics where the Black Panther narrative originated (on which there is more in the article's first section, which follows).

7 For the concept of a tacit pact between the author and audience of a fictional work that helps sustain its special ontological status, see Wolfgang Iser, "Feigning in Fiction," in *Identity of the Literary Text*, eds. Mario J. Valdes and Owen Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 204–27.

8 Rayvon Fouché, "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud: African Americans, American Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological Creativity," *American Quarterly* 58.3 (2006): 639–661, esp. 641.

9 Jahan Ramazani, "The Wound of History: Walcott's *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction," *PMLA* 112.3 (1997): 405–17.

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that constructs the African as initially oblivious to the historical and ethical burden of the transatlantic slave trade, but who must ultimately experience that story, and that burden, as duly shared and *felt.* I interpret the film's attempts to deal with this imperation through Michael Rothberg's recent formulation of "the implicated subject," even as it pushes beyond a circum-Atlantic frame, his concomitant examination of "(not) being a descendant" of slavery.[10] Recapitulating on my epigraphs, I contend that the vividly imagined "Afropolis" we reexperience in *Black Panther* is an "entanglement of African and modern" that enables its "Black creator(s)" to "imagine, think, construct and energize" a fresh way to tell an older story "about culture, technology, and things to come."[11] In the "techno-black cultural syncretism" of Wakanda as Alegropolis,[12] African and African diasporic subjects confront their mutual implication as if in a hall of mirrors. Wakanda thereby becomes exemplum for a world that similarly must confront omitted truths on which modernity's received narratives are constituted, even while reviving an older dream of pan-African leadership in the wake of decolonization.[13]

The Radiant Wound of the Implicated Subject

"I have a lot of pain inside me," Coogler admitted to an audience at the Brooklyn Academy of Music after the release of *Black Panther.* "We were taught that we lost the things that made us African. We lost our culture, and now we have to make do with scraps."[14] *Black Panther* stages this desire to compensate for the loss of culture as memory, as is clear from its very opening. "Baba, tell me a story," asks a young boy of his father. "Which one?" The father asks back. In response, we receive a synoptic account of the film's framing narrative. Wakanda, vibranium, and the so-called "heart-shaped herb" that grants special powers to the Black Panther are tightly interlocked in memory passed from father to child, in stark contrast to the present announced on screen as Oakland, California, 1992. The scene dissolves into a confusingly rapid confrontation between the brothers T'Chaka and N'Jobu, witnessed by T'Chaka's right-hand man M'zuri. Here occurs the fratricide at the heart of *Black Panther*, but this realization will come to us viewers only in retrospect. At this moment, the only visual connection between the memory of Wakanda and the scene in Oakland is the fluorescent purple tattoo on N'Jobu's lower lip revealed to us. This tattoo, which repeats the color of vibranium as it is shown striking the African continent, and the heart-shaped herb, will keep us clued into the story. It will reappear as the color of Bast, the Panther goddess; as vibranium's presence in the Black Panther's suit; and wherever, indeed, vibranium leaves

10 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), esp. 59–86.

11 For the epigraphs, see Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Afro-Futurism 1.0," in *Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New Wave Trajectory*, ed. Marleen Barr (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 6–13; Imamu Amiri Baraka, "Technology & Ethos," in *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze: Essays Since 1965* (New York: Random House, 1972), 155–58; and Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, "Afropolis: From Johannesburg," *PMLA* 122. 1 (2007): 281–88.

12 Fouché, "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud," 657.

13 On this much-traversed topic, see now Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), and also Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A Biography of the Short-Lived Third World* (New Delhi: Leftword: 2007).

14 Jelani Cobb, " 'Black Panther' and the Invention of Africa," *The New Yorker*, February 18, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/black-panther-and-the-invention-of-africa.

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its mark. It will not be associated with Killmonger, until he reveals his own inner-lip tattoo, hidden from the world. I read this recurrent mark of vibranium as a polyvalent signifier of how T'Challa and Killmonger are "implicated" in each other's story.

If vibranium's purple glow is a detail inherited from the Marvel meta-narrative (discussed in greater detail later in the article), and Killmonger's tattoo a version of a widespread "Romance" trope (the mark that reveals the pauper as the prince), in their conflation lies Coogler's response to the "pain" of cultural deracination. The glowing purple tattoo, sign of a genealogical connection to Wakanda, is an Afro-Futuristic mark of consanguinity ruptured, disavowed, but indelibly embodied. The fantastical embedding of a fictitious mineral into the Black body to elevate it as superhuman draws on Afro-Futurism's investment in the extraordinary survival skills of "aliens arising out of alienation."[15] As the liner notes to *The Quest* by Detroit electronic duo Drexciya ponder, "Could it be possible for humans to breathe underwater? A fetus in its mother's womb is certainly alive in an aquatic environment"; subsequently, the notes postulate that pregnant women thrown overboard during the Middle Passage could have given birth "to babies that never needed air."[16] These ruminations arose out of Drexciya's musical project on Drexiyans, "sea creatures of a superior submarine civilization."[17] Coogler's deployment of the tattoo riffs off this tradition of transforming through technological prosthesis the systematic dehumanization of the enslaved Black body. Stamped on Killmonger's body, the glowing tattoo is reminiscent of what Jahan Ramazani calls the "radiant metaphor of the wound," sustained on the ankle of St. Lucian fisherman Philoctete in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*.[18] Coogler, like Walcott, wields this "hybrid, polyvalent, and unpredictable" metaphor in a "knitting together of different histories of affliction."[19] As the mark of Wakanda now branding the body of a diasporic Wakandan, the tattoo implicates Wakandans in the diaspora's experience. The vibranium tattoo radiates not just the superiority of the Wakandans but "the murderous protocols of the modern symbolic order through an intimate engagement with what marks and mars us."[20] It suggests transatlantic history's legacy as "multidirectional," [21] shared between Killmonger, representative of diaspora, and T'Challa, representative of home.

The polyvalent wound thus conveys the coexistence of specialness and abjection. It operates on a somatic plane of a shared traumatic memory that makes the body generate its own resources for repair, as seen in its frequent deployment as trope by African intellectuals confronting their implication in the transatlantic slave trade. For instance, during the international conference inaugurating UNESCO's Slave Route Project at Ouidah, Benin, in September 1994, two Africans, the Moroccan poet and visual artist Mohamed Kacimi and the Beninese musician and lyricist Pierre Dassaboutè, wove these

15 Mayer, "Africa As an Alien Future," 562.

16 Drexciya, *The Quest*, Submerge, 1997. Discussed by Mayer, "Africa As an Alien Future," 562.

17 Mayer, "Africa As an Alien Future," 562.

18 Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (London: Farrar, Giroux and Strauss, 1990); Ramazani, "The Wound of History," 405.

19 Ramazani, "The Wound of History," 405–06.

20 Joshua Bennett, "Buck Theory," *The Black Scholar* 49.2 (2019): 27–37, 39. Note that in his argumentation, the "us" represents the African American community.

21 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in an Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

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tropes into poems addressed to a formidable assembly of intellectuals, bureaucrats, and cultural producers. Dassaboutè's poem, "La cicatrice" (the scar), and Kacimi's poem, "Le corps de la mémoire" (the body of memory), are bound into the volumes containing the conference proceedings.[22] They follow essays in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, delivered by the conference delegates during this grand occasion, imagined as veritable "Afro-American bridges" linking up the effects of slavery with the effects of colonialism.[23] Within this cumulative attempt to tie the two sides of the Atlantic through shared material traces and spiritual practices, the poems erupt as plangent calls to reconciliation instantiated in images of castration, whipping, blood, and the melanated bond between Africa and its diasporas. These lyrical invocations of the scar on the body of memory acknowledge what the scientific and political addresses at the conference cannot articulate: that remembering the past from Africa predicates remembering the complicity of the great African kingdoms in converting slavery into a building block of capitalism and empire. Like those poems, the glowing tattoo, too, functions as an Afro-American bridge, connecting, in Dassaboutè's words, the "people that pigmentation refuses to dislocate."[24] But in presenting its Africans as citizens of Wakanda, a nation never colonized, *Black Panther* complicates the stakes of implication as a shared responsibility toward entangled histories of Africa and America sedimented within the vibranium-branded, transatlantic Black body.

Wakanda's *Black Panther* versus an Alienated Killmonger

These complications, already apparent in the film's opening, both draw on and depart from details accumulated within the meta-narrative that Coogler inherited from the interconnected comic books created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby for Marvel, Inc., in 1966. The "sensational Black Panther" debuted in the fifty-second issue of their Fantastic Four comics series. Its popularity propelled him to a starring role, first in the Jungle Action series (1973–76), and, subsequently, in several eponymous Black Panther series from 1977 onward.[25] Along the way, the narrative accrued recognizable details, preoccupations, and a visual look, all of which have been cumulatively honed by different writers and artists right down to Ta-Nehisi Coates's version, which debuted in 2016.[26] Coates's *Black Panther* departs from its predecessors in introducing a marked tone of

22 *La route de l'esclave/ The Slave Route: Conference de lancement de projet internationale 'la route de l'esclave', Unesco-Benin*, 2 vols. (1994). Unpublished documents paginated noncontinuously deposited at Les Archives Nationales du Bénin. The poems commence a nonpaginated annex to the second volume of the two-volume proceedings. They are translated from the French and analyzed in detail in Ananya Jahanara Kabir, "Afro-Latin-Africa: Movement and Memory in Benin," in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature and World History*, ed. May Hawas (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 234–45, esp. 240–01.

23 See Kabir, "Afro-Latin-Africa," 240.

24 For the original quote, and the discussion from which this summary is extracted, see Kabir, "Afro-Latin-Africa," 240–01.

25 Peter Parker and Roy Thomas, *Marvell Platinum: The Definitive Black Panther* (Tunbridge Wells, UK: Marvel Entertainment, 2017) is a handy compendium of the landmark issues within these evolving and branching series. See also the "Foreword" by Brady Webb, and epilogue, "The True Origin of the Black Panther," by Mike Conroy (both n.p.).

26 Ta-Nehisi Coates, with art by Brian Stelfrieze, *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet*, vol. 1 (New York: Marvel Entertainment, 2015); the first twelve editions are available already as a collector's edition. For more details, see https://ta-nehisicoates.com/graphic-novels/black-panther-2016/.

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angst, brooding, and existentialist crisis, the clearest manifestation of an African diasporic takeover of the received narrative to craft an expression of Afro-pessimist consciousness. But it is still too enmeshed in the visual and narrative universe of the graphic novel to be able to express that diasporic vision in a dramatic and tightly plotted fashion. In particular, it is bound to the dilated and enfolded sequentiality of the comic series form, which, like a long-running television serial, often elaborates on narrative details through retrospective ramification and is designed to evade full narrative closure.[27] The film, on the other hand, deploys its cinematic apparatus to deepen the philosophical and ethical dimension that Coates's version suggests while tightening its materials into a classical Aristotelean narrative with a clear beginning, middle, and end,[28] which grips us for a finite duration of screen time. Respecting the accrued narrative elements as aide-mémoire and precedent, Coogler nevertheless reorganizes them to fulfill a new cinematic remit defined by the quest to explore through an Afro-Futurist vocabulary the shared wounds of an implicated subjectivity.

In this work of reorganization, the confrontation between T'Challa and Killmonger emerges as central. It gives the film a strong narrative and ethical plumb line, which allows it to develop a sustained pairing of opposites that makes it something of a structuralist's dream. T'Challa and Killmonger are not just opponents, as they are portrayed in the Stan Lee issue of 1973, which introduces the latter character.[29] Rather, they orbit each other as related yet opposing principles, which gives their rivalry the depth and grandeur of epic or tragic proportions. On the one hand, they are joined by kinship—knowledge that we, the audience, are party to, thanks to the opening scene, but this is something that T'Challa and the Wakandans must gradually learn. This process of learning and reassessment of the status quo is what drives the narrative, an early foreshadowing of which we find in Black Panther's betrayal by B'Tumba, son of N'Baza, the "witch doctor."[30] The film develops these inherited narrative kernels by assigning the two cousins diametrically opposing attributes through a range of metonymic scales. These metonymies stack up elegantly and spectacularly thanks to the storytelling possibilities of cinema, realized through Coogler's directorial acumen. T'Challa as Black Panther is associated with not merely Wakanda, but a rootedness in Wakanda; in contrast, N'Djaka as Killmonger is nomadic, restless, and has made the battlefield wildernesses of the world his home. Their respective statuses of emplacement and placelessness are further augmented by the company they keep. T'Challa is surrounded by a loving and warm family of Black women: his mother Ramonda, his sister Shuri, his ex-lover Nakia, and Okoye, the leader of the female warrior cadre, the Dora Milaje.

27 There is a vast body of research on the theoretical implications of graphic narrative forms. A useful starting point is Jared Gardner and David Herman, "Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory: Introduction," *SubStance* 40.1 (2011): 3–13, and the other essays contained in this special issue of the journal coedited by them.

28 As detailed in his *Poetics*, see James Hutton, ed. and trans., *Aristotle's Poetics* (New York: Norton, 1982). See also Michael Tierno, *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets from the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization* (New York: Hachette, 2012).

29 Stan Lee, "Panther's Rage," which introduces "the man called Kill-Monger," *Jungle Action* 6 (1973).

30 Stan Lee, "Look Homeward, Avenger," wherein is "revealed at last! The origin of T'Challa," *The Avengers* 87 (1970).

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N'Djaka as Killmonger, on the other hand, is a loner who chooses to hang out with the mercenary Ulysses Klaw.[31]

The film early on introduces us to T'Challa in Wakanda about to be anointed its ruler. "It is time to be king!" T'Challa is told. The audience zooms into Wakanda with him, Nakia, and Okoye, who travel in Wakanda's Afro-Futurist aircraft. We enjoy its verdant pastoral, soaring skyline, a lyrical, gently pulsating soundtrack, the elaborate outfits of the Wakandans, their variegated English accents, and the sounds of Xhosa and Swahili. Through sensuous immersion, we become fans of a carefully assembled Africanity.[32] The subsequent scene abruptly pulls us away to the cold gray North: London, where, inside a clinically minimalist museum, we see N'Djaka as Killmonger. Clad in an outfit from the 'hood, he looks and speaks like a hip-hop artist. His relationship to reservoirs of Africanity is mediated by the glass of the museum case. Thus, the film establishes Wakanda as an African utopia within which T'Challa is seamlessly integrated, and from which Killmonger, equally, is alienated. T'Challa lives and *is* Wakanda. But Killmonger can only connect with a deterritorialized "Africa" through violent repossession of whichever of its fragments he can lay his hands on. The masks T'Challa and M'Baku don during the ritual combat that seals T'Challa's claim to the title of Black Panther are mirrored by the West African mask from the museum's collection that Killmonger pulls over his face, even as he grabs the vibranium ax from the museum case to sell to Ulysses Klaw. The symmetrical raised scars he bears may recall West African scarification techniques, even as the Wakandans' tattoo recalls the "radiant wound" of enslavement. But his auto-scarification is another instantiation of a desire for ritual; in actuality, it marks his successes in post–Cold War killing fields where he has served the army of the United States of America. As Klaw reminds him, "You can scar yourself as much as you want, but to them [the Wakandans] you will always be an outsider."

The African Diaspora's Castigation of Africa

The Wakanda-based opposition of T'Challa and Killmonger maneuvers metonymy to construct an ethical divergence between the two. T'Challa is morally upright; Killmonger is morally suspect. Killmonger is dissimulating and manipulative in his interrogation of the White curator at the museum even as he knows that she has ingested something harmful that he has administered to her. As the audience is let into the secret, we can go in two directions with this presentation of Killmonger: we can assess it as either just or unjust. Killmonger is angry; when people are angry, they do things that they do not mean and some that they may regret later. Furthermore, the narrative provides enough information for us to consider Killmonger as justifiably angry. We know he has been robbed of his inheritance and his connection to Wakanda. His own uncle, T'Chaka,

31 In setting up this particular dichotomy between his protagonists, Coogler is drawing on the repercussions of enslavement on the relationship between Black men and women in the Americas, which have been acknowledged and extensively calibrated. The *locus classicus* here may be seen as Toni Morrison's novels; for representative scholarly investigations, see for instance, Eudine Barriteau, *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities: A Theoretical and Empirical Approach* (St. Augustine: University of the West Indies Press, 2004), and Bennett, "Buck Theory."

32 This assemblage of Africanity will be examined more closely later in the article.

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killed his father and abandoned him, simply because his father was moved by the plight of African Americans—a cause that continues to resonate with and motivate Killmonger. But something ensures we do not bestow our full sympathy on him: the fact that he is presented as uncouth as well as violent. Killmonger doesn't appreciate the finer things in life. Delicacy and nuance are foreign to him. Thus, he remains foreign to Wakanda. Killmonger as Black Panther is hideously inappropriate, from the moment he strides into the throne room to greet Ramonda with an insouciant "Hi Aunty." He has come to exercise his blood right, but to the dismay of the Wakandan elite, he has forgotten how to behave. After returning from a disorienting ritual journey to the ancestral plane, he orders the burning of the heart-shaped herb—a wantonly violent act heightened by his crude language: "When I tell you to do something I mean that shit."

If Killmonger remains forever the usurper, lacking the poise and gravitas we expect of the Black Panther, T'Challa as Black Panther is in his rightful place. Our assessment of who is more fit for the purpose continues to be guided by the way each behaves with people around him, particularly women. Killmonger manipulates a nameless Black woman enamored of him to pull off the robbery of the vibranium ax from the museum in London. In contrast, T'Challa is utterly respectful in his relations to women. He never bosses around the Dora Milaje or pulls rank in any way. He can sustain a warm and loving relationship with his ex-lover, Nakia, without mean-spiritedness or jealousy. The scene where his sister, Shuri, presents him with a choice of Black Panther suits reveals him as an affectionate and tolerant older brother even while establishing his impeccable taste. As Shuri observes admiringly, he knows when to expose his toes in sandals (he had just been to a meeting of the Wakandan council of elders in those sandals and a minimalist monochrome outfit reminiscent of Nehru's Bandung-era jackets). He puts thought into his "Lookbook": of the two Black Panther suits she offers him, he goes unhesitatingly for the more discreet one. "Tempting," he says of the other, "but the objective is not to be noticed." Predictably, Killmonger's choice of bling-embellished suit is precisely the one that T'Challa had rejected. Through such details, the contrasts between a suave, elegant, and well-mannered T'Challa and an uncouth and belligerent Killmonger are meticulously built up and sustained, even while the latter's inability to be polite, respectful, or simply nice to people around him erects an effective barrier between him and the audience.

This unflattering portrayal of Killmonger has attracted criticism. "Black Panther is not the story we deserve," declares Christopher Lebron, where the "we" is the African American community; he finds it a "real shame" that "a movie unique for its strong portrayals of strong black women, depends on a shocking devaluation of black men."[33] There is, however, a deeper reason dictating this ostensible devaluation of an African American character by an African American filmmaker. I interpret this reason as the diaspora's castigation of Africa. The conversations between sons and fathers that take place on the ancestral plane after administration of the heart-shaped herb are where Coogler reveals this castigation and its cause. N'Jobu tells the young N'Djaka in their Oakland apartment: "I should have taken you back long ago. Instead, we are both abandoned here." However, he also fears, rightly, as it turns out, "You will not be

33 Christopher Lebron, " 'Black Panther' Is Not the Movie We Deserve," *Boston Review* (2018). http://bostonreview.net/race/christopher-lebron-black-panther.

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welcome. They will say you are lost." In response, the future Killmonger observes (even as the present-day Killmonger returns to the past), "Maybe home is the one that's lost. That's why they can't find us." Because the trigger to this conversation has been N'Djaka's discovery of N'Jobu's relics from Wakanda, and the latter's nostalgia for the home he is in exile from, our identification with Wakanda and concomitant lack of sympathy for Killmonger is destabilized. We are thus prepared for T'Challa's confrontation of T'Chaka on the ancestral plane, where the "omitted truth" is finally articulated. Since, as T'Challa admits, Killmonger "is the monster of our own making," the more monstrous he is shown to be, the worse it makes the Wakandans look. Through these conversations, another structural doubling occurs—N'Jobu is revealed as being better than he was, showing true love for Wakanda, whereas T'Chaka is revealed as being worse than he was, following fratricide with the abandonment of his nephew and the concealment of these uncomfortable truths.

Doppelgängers, Revenants, and an Implicated Temporality

The reversals that the film progressively mobilizes thus chart the breaking through of a superficial narrative layer by an underlying longing and sorrow at deracination that is the burden of the African American as diasporic subject. Coogler constructs two levels of audience response thereby: the semiotic, driven by the metonymies radiating from Wakanda, and the affective, gradually gathering force through the innermost sentiments of cultural loss articulated by Killmonger. He is the spokesman for that feeling of an irreversible loss of culture, which, by his own admission, pains Coogler. If the conversation on the ancestral plane between N'Jobu and N'Djaka is the first invitation to viewers to delve deeper into what created the monstrous Killmonger, more insights emerge toward the end of the film, when he addresses T'Challa after their final combat. "The world took away everything from me, everything I loved." This admission of vulnerability through dispossession is all the more powerful because it follows the combat as structural collapse of the narrative, initiated by Coogler's adroit manipulation of the film's semiotic and affective levels. Meaning and referentiality interchange places as the two opposing principles—alignment to Wakanda and alienation from it—face each other in the final confrontation between T'Challa and Killmonger as doppelgängers. The two heirs claiming the Black Panther's mantle battle it out in a train tunnel, which is both modernity's dark hull and underground railroad. Visually and narratively, the hand to hand combat between the two Black Panthers is stunning precisely because it is so disorienting. Despite the one difference in detail between the suits each Panther wears—the flashier necklace of Killmonger's—and momentary unmasking by each, the rapid editing makes it impossible to discern who fights whom at precise moments. This, then, is the visualization of the hall of mirrors.

We realize at the end that it is T'Challa who emerges victorious to reclaim his throne, but at this very moment, the diaspora's voice also breaks through. The climactic battle of doppelgängers is followed by a denouement where they face each other at morning in the light of a strange new sun. This is the scene for the film's most powerful and moving dialogues that—unsurprisingly from the logic of interchanging semiotic and affective levels I have analyzed—is placed in Killmonger's mouth. When T'Challa offers to heal him in a gesture of reconciliation, he refuses. "Throw my body into the

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ocean, where so many of my ancestors jumped ship, knowing it was better to die than live in bondage." Thus declares Killmonger, the Black Panther manqué, to his cousin and rival, whom the film's narrative retains as the authentic Black Panther, even while the ethical upper hand passes on to the one who remains pretender to the throne of Wakanda. This final maneuver is achieved by Coogler's unambiguous turn to the seaborne horrors of the Middle Passage to give shape to Killmonger's anger toward the world and Wakanda. T'Challa himself, in the film's verdict, has to unlearn what he thinks he knows about himself and his father in order to understand his true self through this encounter. It is a process that the film ends on, when the child in Oakland asks him, "Who are you?" The narrative affords us a glimpse of what lies ahead—in the final scene and a mid-credits sequence that show Shuri, Nakia, and T'Challa undertaking a series of outreach and humanitarian activities that finally bring Wakanda's resources to both the African diaspora and the world at large. But affectively, we are taken out of narrative's linear time to a temporality before and beyond trauma.

Through the doubled Black Panthers, the diasporic longing for a lived memory of Africa intersects with the memory of slavery as denying the enslaved control over time. Its cinematic result is the quest for "different modes of emplotment" through which to imagine "usable pasts, possible futures, and the relentless present."[34] While Afro-modernity is a condition that seeks to reinscribe the "tabula blanca" (blank slate) of collective memory enforced by enslavement,[35] Afro-Futurism is "the self-conscious appropriation of technology in Black popular culture in order to think out problems of imaginative freedom in the past, present, and future."[36] In using these Afro-modern and Afro-Futurist aspirations to imagine a "freedom time" for a renewed Wakanda,[37] the film manifests a commitment to exploring African and African diasporic mutual implication in slavery's traumas. It mines these resources not just to turn the gaze back to Africa, but to hold Africans accountable to the diaspora. An *implicated temporality* is produced thereby. Drawing equally on slavery as a struggle over time management and "African postcoloniality as seeking an altering of the extant historical path towards a new time,"[38] Black Panther asks: What kind of a world could come into being by directing a radically recuperative force toward both kinds of structural problems that enfolds them both within a desired "annihilation of racialized time"?[39] If "one of the goals for the descendants of displaced Africans has been the construction of future pasts to link them to others in diasporic time and space,"[40] this time-space, according to *Black Panther*, centers on Wakanda. Killmonger returns here as the "Revenant [who] can appear at any time to occupy our homes and our favourite haunts."[41] Indeed, by triggering T'Challa's

34 Raphael Dalleo, "Emplotting Postcoloniality: Usable Pasts, Possible Futures, and the Relentless Present," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 13.1 (2004): 129–40.

35 Michael Hanchard, "Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora," *Public Culture* 11.1 (1999): 245–68, esp. 250.

36 Francesca T. Royster, "Labelle: Funk, Feminism, and the Politics of Flight and Fight" *American Studies* 52.4 (2013): 77–98, esp. 78.

37 Wilder, *Freedom Time*.

38 Hanchard, "Afro-Modernity," 254–56, and 263.

39 Hanchard, "Afro-Modernity," 265.

40 Nabeel Zuberi, "Is This the Future? Black Music and Technology Discourse," *Science Fiction Studies* 34.2 (2007): 283–300, esp. 286.

41 Zuberi, "Is This the Future?" 284.

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final change of heart about the deployment of Wakanda's resources, Killmonger's haunting of Wakanda fulfills an Afro-modern remit to explicate "the ethico-political relationship between temporality and notions of human progress."[42]

Alegropolis and an Alegropolitics of Time

In the depiction of Wakanda as a spatial and material realization of implicated temporality, the film makes an explicit move beyond Afro-pessimism toward what I would like to term an *alegropolitics* of time. If a legacy of the Middle Passage is that "Africa and America are no longer conceived of as geographical entitles to be neatly separated, but as convoluted concepts," *Black Panther* demonstrates how its version of Wakanda, generated through "figurations of beliefs, memories and projections that are far too intersected to be told apart" is enabled by "a collution of different time spheres," which is also a "collution of history and myth."[43] A utopian vision of "Africa," very different from the primitivist "far-out mechanized jungle" of the Marvel comics,[44] is galvanized. Coogler's response to emotions that were articulated in Walcott's question, "Where is your tribal memory?" thus departs sharply from the latter's answer, "Sirs, in that grey vault, the sea."[45] The locus for a reconstituted tribal memory now is Wakanda, an Afropolis reimagined as "Alegropolis," or a city-state that projects what I call an "alegropolitics" of pride, happiness, and self-esteem through a harmonious integration of its aesthetic, technological, and ethical dimensions.[46] Coogler invents tradition lavishly through reconstituted signifiers of a strategic-essentialist "Afro-tribalism."[47] The inhabitants of Wakanda are prosperous, literate, numerate, witty, and technological savvy. They are beautiful, fit, and fashionable, sporting lip-plates, face-decoration, scarification, and tattoos together with color-coordinated outfits that recall both the vehicular Afro-dandyism of Kinshasa's Sapeurs and Saville Row's Ghanaian designer, Ozwald Boateng. The kora's limpid ripples unite with the staccato pulses of hip-hop, the perfect soundtrack for the arboreal and organic forms Wakanda's technological prowess assumes. No despoilers of the planet, Wakanda's scientists are in complete harmony with nature. Vibranium itself is an Afro-Futurist synthesis of nature and technology, where mineral meets vegetal as the *purple* "force that through the green fuse drives the flower."[48]

Coogler's Alegropolis thus taps into "blackness as a matrix of competing discourses and strategic essentialisms," but, being brought forth by the relationship between Africans and African Americans, it eliminates the Afro-Futurist tendency to perpetuate

42 Hanchard, "Afro-Modernity," 257.
43 Mayer, "Africa As an Alien Future," 558, 559.
44 Stan Lee, "Fantastic Four: The Way It Began," *Fantastic Four* 53 (New York: Marvel Entertainment, 1963).
45 Derek Walcott, "The Sea Is History," *Poems 1965–1980* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), 237–40.
46 I construct "alegropolitics" in dialogue with Achille Mbembe's enormously productive concept of "necropolitics," which itself drew on Michel Foucault's "biopolitics." See J-A. Mbembé and Libby Meintjes, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11–40.
47 See Ananya Jahanara Kabir, "Decolonizing Time through Dance with Kwenda Lima: Cabo Verde, Creolization, and Affiliative Afromodernity," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (2018): 1–16, esp. 11–12.
48 Dylan Thomas, "The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower," *18 Poems* (London: The Sunday Referee, 1934).

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"Africa as a structuring absence in much of this discourse."[49] On the blank slate, "Africa" is inscribed through a script of its own—the angular writing (followed by English "subtitles") through which the film announces shifts in time and space. The fictive nature of both this script and the Africa it signifies is neither disguised nor apologized for; Wakanda is the shape that dreams of futures past must take. As Alegropolis, moreover, it meshes into its production of felicity a further element that daringly pushes forward Afro-Futurist solutions to slavery's legacy as a grappling with time. Wakanda, we are repeatedly reminded, does not trade with any partner; its prosperity is entirely self-developed. In this conceptualization, "capital," as that which gains value through circulation and exchange, is crucial. What does it mean that Wakanda refuses to exchange with any other geopolitical entity? In this radical rejection of the capitalist flows that structured modern temporality as the metronomic time of labor, Wakanda is the ultimate realization of what Glissant called "creative marronage"[50] that uses the historical memory of the maroon's enclave to "shatter the stone of time."[51] Wakanda's closed world is a fusion of the *quilombo*, which heralds planetary liberation from the shackles of calendar time,[52] and the creole garden, where the enslaved used hoarded-up free time to tend lovingly to medicinal herbs and vegetables for consumption and exchange on their terms[53]—two models of an economic-cultural *modus vivendi* that existed defiantly on the margins of the Plantation matrix. But Wakanda also imagines a continental Africanity free of engagement with slavery as intrinsic to the history of capitalism. Vibranium is this self-contained, self-sufficient Wakanda's *mise-en-abyme*: a mineral that absorbs kinetic energy and stores it up for release as and when needed, on terms dictated by Wakandans alone.

Wakanda, then, is Alegropolis built through (self-)absorption rather than circulation and diffusion. Our initial delight at the Wakandans' epistemological upper hand in maintaining secrecy about their real status may be compromised by our gradual realization that this secrecy is not unproblematic, but it is ultimately modulated into concluding satisfaction at Wakanda's knowledge resources opening up. The film's ends with T'Challa's mid-credits statement at the United Nations: "We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. We must find a way to look." This realization ultimately brings Wakanda's inhabitants closer to an Afropolitanism that foregrounds "Africa as an agent in the making of the modern world order … [which] can hardly be understood outside of its entanglement with multiple elsewheres."[54] Indeed, as

49 Zuberi, "Is This the Future?" 297.

50 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997) 71–72.

51 Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 145.

52 Much has been written on the *quilombo* (the Brazilian version of the maroon enclave); for a contextualizing summary, as well as an exemplary imagining of the *quilombo* as the hoped for liberation from capitalist time, see Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Francesca Negro, "Solano Trindade's Gift to Alvin Ailey: New Evidence from the Black Archives of Mid-America," *The Black Scholar* 49. 3 (2019): 6–20.

53 On the creole garden as resistance, see Michel-Rolf Trouillot, "Culture on the Edges: Creolization in the Plantation Context," *The African Diaspora and Creolization Literary Forum* (Broward County, PA: Action Foundation, 2006), 9–22, esp. 17–18; see also Hanchard, "Afro-Modernity," 255.

54 Achille Mbembe and Sarah Balakrishnan, "Pan-African Legacies, Afropolitan Futures: A Conversation," *Transition* 120 (2016): 28–37, esp. 31.

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Killmonger's vibranium tattoo confirms, Wakanda's genealogical trace is already diffused through the world in an enactment of "diaspora" in its etymological meaning of "a scattering of seeds." Complementing this genealogical basis of connection—the filiative—is, however, a strongly affiliative mode that is enfolded within the film's soundtrack and visual look: the global diffusion of the kinetic energy contained in African-heritage music, dance, and style, through an ongoing dialectical relationship between Africanity and modernity. In the words of Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, "Whiteness and blackness are matters less of race than of style: it's about the way you look."[55] From the gap between their assertion, "It's about the way you look," and T'Challa's closing injunction, "We must find a way to look," arise some difficult questions regarding cultural appropriation that the film flags up. There is more than irony in the museum curator's warning to Killmonger, "These items aren't for sale," but Killmonger's relooting is hardly proposed as a viable solution for a productive future. Underwriting all these models of failed or compromised planetary circulation of tangible and intangible goods that the film traffics in is the film itself as a dream of enchanted sharing. How do we connect? What is the best "way to look"? It is Alegropolis, as the guided crystallization of cinematic excess through "mimetic capital,"[56] or cinema's accrual of aura through global circulation.

Writing about *Black Panther* in the *New Yorker*, Jelani Cobb observes that "there is a fundamental dissonance in the term 'African-American,' two feuding ancestries conjoined by a hyphen. That hyphen standing in for the brutal history that intervened between Africa and America is the subject of *Black Panther*."[57] Its African American filmmaker and his African and Afro-diasporic cast step together into and as the hyphen.[58] Through performance and mimesis, they "activate" that brutal history as implicated subjects born out of a shared memory,[59] enacting Afro-politanism as "the many ways in which Africans, or people of African origin, understand themselves as being part of the world rather than being apart."[60] Coogler's flamboyant invention of African tradition makes redundant the frequently encountered quest for resistance through diasporic recourse to "authentic" African retentions.[61] Instead, he presses his self-avowed "scraps of memory" into Afro-Futurist play with time that moves outward from an circum-Atlantic frame to incorporate the world. The film's ambition is to lever

55 Nuttall and Mbembe, "Afropolis," 287.

56 Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 6; for an examination of "mimetic capital" in a postcolonial context, see Ananya Jahanara Kabir, *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 71–04.

57 Cobb, " 'Black Panther' and the Invention of Africa."

58 As Cobb notes in " 'Black Panther' and the Invention of Africa": it is all but impossible not to notice that Coogler has cast a black American, a Zimbabwean-American, and a Kenyan as a commando team in a film about African redemption. The cast also includes Winston Duke, who is West Indian; Daniel Kaluuya, a black Brit; and Florence Kasumba, a Ugandan-born German woman. The implicit statement in both the film's themes and its casting is that there is a connection, however vexed, tenuous, and complicated, among the continent's scattered descendants."

59 On performance as the ritual activation of memory in the circum-Atlantic context of the slave trade, see Andrew Apter and Lauren Derby, ed., "Introduction," in *Activating the Past: History and Memory in the Black Atlantic World* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), xii–xxx, esp. xix–xx.

60 Mbembe and Balakrishnan, "Pan-African Legacies, Afropolitan Futures," 29.

61 Hanchard, "Afro-Modernity," 246.

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viewers beyond binaries delineating victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and beneficiaries[62] into the implicated subject's shared realm of accountability for historical trauma. T'Challa and Killmonger alike must both understand that "the concepts of legacy, inheritance, and descent seem to promise direct lines of connection between past and present but in practice the process of inheritance across generations rarely goes so smoothly."[63] Indeed, if its hall of mirrors confronts us with the genealogical dimension of implication, Wakanda is the Alegropolis that transforms genealogical into structural implication.[64] What remains with us after the film ends is this memory of having experienced Wakanda as Alegropolis, drawing us into it through a powerful *affiliative afro-modernity*: a form of identification with Africanity that circulates in the modern world, reliant not only on genetic connection but also on the mimetic absorption of style as culture's signifier.[65] If "all forms of restitution prove incommensurable before the brute facts of injury, death, and dispossession," it is equally valid that "racial injustice is not just restricted to descendants of slaves but everyone, including Africans."[66] Moving beyond genealogy as the sole source of responsibility for reparation as *repair*—of the fracture signified by the hyphen highlighted by Cobb, but also of other alienations of modernity,[67] *Black Panther* invites its multiple audiences to connect to and learn from brutal histories of others and elsewheres, rearticulating them in the process as planetary and, indeed, our own(ed).

62 To draw on the categories that Rothberg wishes his conceptualization of thev "implicated subject" to supersede, see Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*.
63 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 63.
64 Here, I develop the productive distinction between "genealogical" and "structural" implication advanced by Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 59–86.
65 Kabir, "Decolonizing Time through Dance with Kwenda Lima," 11–12.
66 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 59, 66.
67 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 183; Kabir, "Decolonizing Time through Dance with Kwenda Lima," 6.

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