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Beyond Representation: Disney/Marvel's "Black Panther" as a Womanist Text

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BEYOND REPRESENTATION:
Disney/Marvel's *Black Panther* as a Womanist Text

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Beyond Representation: Disney/Marvel's *Black Panther* as a Womanist Text

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ABSTRACT

Disney/Marvel's *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) is touted as a cultural phenomenon for its predominately Black cast and crew and its portrayal of Blackness and Africa in progressive and noble ways. However, *Black Panther*'s demonstration of the tenets of Alice Walker's Womanism bears deeper examination. The superhero movie *Black Panther* is relevant culturally and scholarly, not only because it broke domestic and international box office records, nor because a predominately Black cast and crew led these achievements, but because these firsts are achieved through a film driven by strong themes of Womanism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

May this project honor the foremothers whose wisdom has empowered me to cultivate my own garden.

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INTRODUCTION

W.E.B. Du Bois said being Black in America creates a “double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 2008, p. 3). Although written more than one hundred years ago and in response to propaganda that demonized Black and other non-White people, Du Bois’s words have sustained their accuracy through mass media’s ubiquitous distribution of negative stereotypes that have become canon. However, on February 16, 2018, Africans and Africans of the Diaspora saw ourselves in a major studio film without pervasive tropes of enslavement and subjugation, where we were not the comic relief or martyrs, where Black women were not shapeless and without agency. Disney/Marvel’s *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) provides overwhelmingly positive representations of Black people, especially Black women. The film and its production team are universally praised for bringing Black Panther and Wakanda to life and offering marginalized audiences the historically rare opportunity to positively and dynamically engage with a mainstream movie (Allen, 2018; Turner-Lee, n.d.; White, 2018).

Black Panther reclaims the Black Panther and Wakanda from its White creators (Griffin & Rossing, 2020; Wanzo, 2018). The historical record of representations of Blackness in American media cultivated an enduring stereotype of a dangerous and/or unintelligent “other” (González-Velázquez, Shackelford, Keller, Vinney, & Drake, 2020)—specifically a “monster” class/caste often used in place of marginalized identities

in science fiction and fantasy to further a White male hero's journey (Girish, 2018; White, 2018).

Marvel Studios is owned by the largest and most profitable entertainment conglomerate in the world: The Walt Disney Company. The uniqueness of *Black Panther* lies in it first being a Black-helmed and Black-cast international blockbuster in an industry that historically considers Black art a risky investment (Erigha, 2019). Secondly, it is a Disney commodity within the corporation's practice of whitewashing and rewriting past, present, and future events throughout its media-making legacy. Thirdly, as a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), *Black Panther* is rooted in hegemony, patriarchy, and violence, which are default functions of superhero films, yet the film's success can be largely attributed to the women in front and behind the camera (Allen, 2018; Coleman, 2018; Ford, 2018).

Set in the fictional African nation of Wakanda, *Black Panther* tells the story of prince and super-powered warrior T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) as he assumes the throne. The Black Panther protects Wakanda's interests and traditions with the support of the all-female royal guard, the Dora Milage. Wakanda's utopia is threatened by a new enemy who seeks to use Wakandan Vibranium-infused technology for world domination.

When *Black Panther* was named film of the year by the African-American Film Critics Association, its co-founder Shawn Evans described the film as one that "...changed the culture and became a defining moment for Black America" (McNary, 2018). The film places viewers within the borders of a flourishing Black-majority nation "that exists beyond the grip of Western imperialism" and puts the narrative "beyond the

normative boundaries of Black suffering and racialized catastrophe that have become ornamental in Hollywood” (Griffin & Rossing, 2020, p. 211). Black creativity is both resistance and revolution.

Critically and commercially successful, *Black Panther* brings Afrofuturism and Black Liberation ideologies into mainstream discourse. The *Review of Communication* explores *Black Panther* in myriad ways in Volume 20, Issue 3. Scholars critique the film’s erasure of Queer identities and the film’s reception as a “great unifier” while also exploring how the film’s positive representation of marginalized identities affects audiences (Asante & Nziba Pindi, 2020; González-Velázquez et al., 2020; Griffin & Rossing, 2020; Harris, 2020; Meyer, 2020). Conversely, some film and cultural scholars identify parallels between the film and nationalistic ideologies from which fascists governments and genocide emerge (Faramelli, 2019).

The Journal for Pan African Studies’ August 2018 issue is dedicated to *Black Panther* and explores Black Liberation and identity. Liberation, though, requires a certain Civic Imagination. Henry Jenkins details how *Black Panther* ignites Civic Imagination, making Liberation more of a reality because the film’s audiences now have a rendering of sorts for what freedom looks like (Jenkins, 2018). Cultural scholar and critic Mako Fitts Ward tells of an early example of Civic Imagination of icons of the Harlem Renaissance through today (Mako Fitts Ward, 2017).

Though only recently embraced by the mainstream, the exploration and cultivation of identity within Africans of the Diaspora has been in constant practice. Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and other Harlem Renaissance artists committed to making art that collectively illuminates and affirms Black life. Their goal was to also

make art accessible in order “to incite social and political change, and to celebrate the creation of Black art, unapologetic in its departure from dominant White cultural standards” (Mako Fitts Ward, 2017, p. 148). Hurston and her contemporaries set out to counter negative narratives and humanize Black people through Black art.

Black Panther has been widely praised but is also not without criticism, specifically regarding the filmmakers’ exclusion of queer and female comic book writers and queer characters. “*Black Panther* functions as a representation of racial and ethnic marginalization, while simultaneously firmly fixing its discourse within heteronormativity and homophobia ... Black queer women were explicitly erased from this fantastical reimagining of supposedly liberated Blackness—both in cinematic representation and in the recognition of their contributions to its legacy” (Meyer, 2020, p. 237). When examining Wakanda’s nationalism and centuries-long isolationist policies, Anthony Faramelli states that the fictional nation “achieved its utopian dream by sacrificing all other Africans” in favor of an “isolationist foreign policy” and “hyper-conservative” domestic ones (Faramelli, 2019). Although these criticisms are justified, Wakanda’s worldview shifts by the end of the film, and that change comes about through the influence of women and Womanist’s ideologies.

Black Panther offers dynamic representations of Black women to mainstream audiences (Chikafa-Chipiro, 2019; Girish, 2018; Hickey, 2018; Jenkins, 2018; McNary, 2018; Wanzo, 2018). The Geena Davis Institute for Gender in Media studies the impact of representative images. Their most recent report documents the evolution of Black female representation in American film and television (“Representations of Black Women in Hollywood,” 2021).

Although most scholarly writings about *Black Panther* mention the women of the film, few analyze the significance of the female characters. Beverly Bond's anthology *Black Girls Rock!* (Bond, 2018) gives Black women from all industries a platform to express self-love, the Love of other women, self-determination, and their push toward individual and collective freedom (Womanist tenets). Black Feminist Thought, according to Patricia Hill-Collins, focuses on overcoming intersecting oppressions (Collins, 2002). And although *Black Panther* has examples of women triumphing over hardships, there is no White supremacist capitalistic system that strives to keep Black women at the lowest rungs of the socio-political ladder within Wakanda's borders.

This paper explores *Black Panther*'s three main female characters and how they model Womanist ideologies. Alice Walker describes a Womanist as one who demonstrates: "outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior," is "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female," and "Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*" (Walker, 1983, p. iv). First, I will look at Princess Shuri as an embodiment of audacious civic imagination. Next, I will consider Nakia as an embodiment of progressive Liberation. Finally, I will analyze Okoye as the embodiment of Womanism's Love of self and others. Womanism abounds in *Black Panther*.

WHAT IS WOMANISM?

Womanism presents the fundamental goal of Feminism (gender equality) through Black identities, without mainstream cultural norms and "man-hating." Central to Womanism is self-determination—freedom to live or act as one chooses without consultation with or the influence of others. Alice Walker first coined the term

“Womanist” in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (Walker, 1983), and it has become a foundational idea for many (Anyabwile & Adams, 2018; Collins, 2002; Rahatt, 2020; Tsuruta, 2012; Wanzo, 2018).

This project analyzes the ways the 2018 film *Black Panther* demonstrates Alice Walker’s Womanism. This work examines moments where Womanism plays out in the film. Princess Shuri’s (Leticia Wright) “outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior”; Wakandan War Dog spy Nakia’s (Lupita Nyong’o) commitment to the survival and wholeness of *all* her people; and general Okoye’s (Danai Gurira) of the Dora Milage, service through Love and loyalty.

A Womanist, Alice Walker plainly states *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden*, is “a feminist of color” (xi). However, the meaning is much deeper than that. Black Feminism, when distilled further, is Womanism, which centers Love (for self and others) and community rather than the intersecting oppressions that are the through-line of Black Feminist thought.

HOW *BLACK PANTHER* DEMONSTRATES WOMANISM

PRINCESS SHURI AND THE CIVIC IMAGINATION

For audiences, *Black Panther*’s Afrofuturistic Wakanda provides “radical re-imaginings of both the past and the future” (Girish, 2018, p. 33). Afrofuturism employs scientific and magical realism elements into works to challenge pervasive stereotypes and is an example of what Henry Jenkins calls “civic imagination.” Jenkins defines this as:

the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social,
political, or economic conditions. ... realized through ... the ability

to imagine what a better world might look like, to construct a model of change-making, to see one's self as a civic agent, to feel solidarity with others whose perspectives differ from one's own, and to belong to a larger collective with shared interests, among others. (Jenkins, 2018, p. 1)

The Civic Imagination of *Black Panther* is fostered by Princess Shuri (Leticia Wright), who can be placed in the same canon as the civic imaginings of Black womanhood envisioned by Black female science fiction and fantasy authors such as Octavia Butler and N.K. Jemisin, and others whom Walker might describe as “outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful*” (Walker, 1983, p. xi).

Princess Shuri serves as the head of the Wakandan Design Group, the group responsible for the technology in the film. Although introduced as brainy teenaged comic relief, Shuri's presence is potent. She is the antithesis to my experience as a young Black woman in America where, “when representations of Black women were present in film, our bodies were there to serve—to enhance and maintain White womanhood as object of the phallogentric gaze” (Hooks, 1992, p. 119). There is no White gaze to set the standard for Black childhood and identity in *Black Panther*. Shuri does not back down from a challenge throughout the film and is quick to voice her opinion. Despite being chastised for her snark by her mother, Shuri's enthusiasm for experimentation and discovery is never quelled.

Shuri is responsible for creating and maintaining all the Wakandan technology that enhances the Black Panther's superpowers, such as the Vibranium-laced nano-suit,

with her team kimoyo beads, sand table, self-driving cars, and so much more. Civic Imagination suggests that “before we can build a better world, we need to imagine what one looks like” (Jenkins, 2018, p. 3). When the Royal Talon Fighter first breaches the Wakandan hologram/force field, audiences take in the Golden City where thatched-roofed skyscrapers glisten and the mystical element Vibranium courses through everyone and everything. On the bustling streets of the Golden City, we see Wakandans project screens and make purchases from small Vibranium-fueled bracelets on their wrists while trains hover down red-dirt roads, propelled by magnetic levitation. When T’Challa greets his sister, Shuri asks for the EMP (electromagnetic pulse) beads used in the last mission. T’Challa scoffs and says they worked fine to which Shuri replies that there is always room for improvement. Before she happily trots off to refine her work, she says to her brother, “How many times do I have to *teach* you?” This moment is a signpost that T’Challa and Wakanda will learn and grow, thanks to the influence of the women who are central to the success of the film and Wakanda as a community.

Womanism is concerned about the wellbeing of the community, and Shuri utilizes the cosmic gift of Vibranium to enrich the lives of all Wakandans and those who encounter them. The Wakandan War Dog spies have stealth weaponry and shields, undetectable to mainstream surveillance (courtesy of Shuri and the Wakanda Design Group). A small Vibranium-fueled kimoyo bead can be a communicator or a cloaking device. This same bead can instantly read, store, and transmit biometric data. In the case of injured CIA agent Everett Ross, the bead embedded itself into his spine and kept him alive after being shot. In a post-credits scene, Shuri is with Bucky Barnes (the newly deprogrammed Winter Soldier). For the first time in nearly a century, Bucky is at peace.

Still, he is timid—afraid of a relapse into “murder-robot mode,” Shuri, however, gently encourages him to join the Wakanda community surrounding him. Shuri’s constant exploration benefits her community and the world.

When the usurper “Killmonger” (Michael B. Jordan) claims the Wakandan throne intending to wage war on the world using Wakandan technology, Shuri, Queen Ramonda (Angela Bassett), and Nakia (Lupita Nyong’o) flee to the mountain of the Jabari. Just before they are discovered, Shuri reveals that she has the Black Panther suit hidden in a modest necklace. At the same time, Nakia reveals that she has the heart-shaped herb that gives the Black Panther superhuman abilities. Although Queen Ramonda urges Nakia to take the herb and become the Black Panther, Shuri is prepared to do so, evident in her straightened posture and a defiant glint in her eye.

Womanism is derived from “womanish,” a term used to describe a child who is “acting grown” (Walker, 1983, p. xi). When writer/director Ryan Coogler and production designer Hannah Beachler discuss this scene in the film commentary, they speak of the ideological dynamics among the women, stating that Queen Ramonda represents tradition while Shuri and Nakia are innovators. Coogler also points out that in the Jabari mountains, Shuri is without her labs and the gadgets that most Wakandans have come to rely on, leaving her largely unable to help. Her mother, however, equipped with just a simple mortar and pestle, creates an elixir that induces T’Challa’s rebirth. According to Coogler, Queen Ramonda teaches her willful daughter the old ways (Ryan Coogler, 2018). Although Wakanda embraces both tradition and technology and Shuri has “scoffed at tradition” (Coogler & Cole, 2018, p. 23) here, Shuri sits at her mother’s elbow and allows herself to be taught.

This lesson subverts “the Hollywood representational practice where it is solely males who assist each other” (Chikafa-Chipiro, 2019, p. 10). Energized by T’Challa’s rebirth, Shuri and Nakia return to the Golden City and ambush “Killmonger.” With her Vibranium gauntlets, Shuri nearly brings “Killmonger” down. Later in the battle, Shuri’s understanding of the mining system in the Great Mound helps T’Challa defeat “Killmonger.” Wakanda’s technology is dynamic and multifaceted, just like its creator. As this analysis demonstrates, Shuri uses her intellect and resources to build a better, more equitable Wakanda. She does this so effectively that she is put in charge of the Wakandan effort to do the same for the broader world at the end of the film.

NAKIA AND PROGRESSIVE LIBERATION

Some scholars posit that Afrofuturism is revolutionary, not in its perceived novelty, but in its ability to affect real-life change (Chikafa-Chipiro, 2019). In the film, we learn that, for centuries, Wakanda has protected itself through a closed border and nationalistic isolationist policies, yet the country routinely sends War Dog spies out to monitor the rest of the world. Although much discourse, scholarly and otherwise, focus on the rightness of “Killmonger’s” vision, the War Dog spy Nakia changes Wakanda and the futures of Africans worldwide. By championing international Liberation for all oppressed people, Nakia lives out the tenet of Womanism that is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983, p. xi).

Being a Wakandan spy does not have the same sleek sex appeal as James Bond, but Nakia, a River Tribe noble, uses the invisibility of being a Black woman in the world to her advantage. We first meet Nakia deep in the Sambisa Forest of Nigeria, where she

has embedded herself among women and children kidnapped by a militia group styled after Boko Haram. T'Challa and Okoye zero in on Nakia's location, and once the Black Panther is on the ground, he quickly dispatches most of the kidnappers. Nakia, however, disarms and takes down a good number of bad guys as well. She seizes the opportunity to affect change without stopping to acknowledge T'Challa. Her goal is not deference but Liberation.

Another kidnapper/soldier nearly shoots T'Challa in the back, but Nakia tackles the man to the ground. The Black Panther has impenetrable armor and super strength. Nakia is in a hijab and cloak, yet she unflinchingly risks her life. In a flash of gunfire and ricocheting bullets, T'Challa stalks toward the gunman. The film's screenplay describes what happens next as:

Nakia dives out, kicking the young militant's gun from his hand and grabs him in a neck-lock. Swinging around, Nakia kicks Panther in the chest, stopping his momentum. (Coogler & Cole, 2019, p. 10)

Nakia snatches off her disguise and reveals the gunman to be a kidnapped boy while demanding T'Challa stand down and spare the boy's life. Once again, she does not bow to T'Challa nor slow her momentum for patriarchal protocol. Alice Walker's Womanism places the genders in complementary roles, with women being central to the collective wholeness of the community. According to Dr. Dorothy Randall Tsuruta, Womanism "...works for the whole, and is opposed to the division of Black people" (Tsuruta, 2012, p. 3).

Although Wakandan leadership traditions lean heavily on patriarchy, women have autonomy and the freedom to question authority. At Warrior Falls, when each tribe presents a warrior for Ritual Combat where the victor will rule Wakanda and become the Black Panther, Nakia issues a silent challenge. Although her River Tribe elder says they will not fight, Nakia's responding inhalation and subtle flexing suggest that she would fight for the throne and win if that were her choice. Later, Nakia asks the newly anointed king how he will lead Wakanda into the future, but he turns the question back on her. Her answer is outreach: education and resources. Nakia understands her duty, not only to her country but to the oppressed of the world. Her independence and interdependence are vital components of Walker's Womanism, which she describes as "not separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist ... Traditionally capable" (Walker, 1983, p. xi). These characteristics are also appealing to T'Challa, who would like Nakia to be his queen.

However, romance is not found so easily between T'Challa and Nakia because Nakia cherishes her independence, autonomy, and ability to choose—all traits T'Challa has not yet fully come to appreciate at this point in the film.

OKOYE'S LOVE OF SELF AND OTHERS

Mass media relies on Eurocentric standards and colorism to influence audiences' perceptions of beauty. *Black Panther* provides audiences with dark-skinned women doing extraordinary things without chemically treated hair or an excess of exposed skin.

Part of the aesthetic pleasure of the Blackness in the film is the number of beautifully dark-skinned women who eschew processed hair.

Decolonizing western beauty standards in a Hollywood film is no small affair (Wanzo, 2018, p. 2).

At the same time, centering Afrocentric beauty and self-determination of Wakanda creates a paradox that Western audiences have not experienced in a major studio-backed, Black-cast film. “Black representation [in mass media] has been a tool in White supremacy” (Wanzo, 2018, p. 1). “Rarely,” Devika Girish says, “does big-screen science fiction allow people of color to represent and interrogate their own lived experiences of subjugation and exploitation” (Girish, 2018, p. 30).

One such experience of self-interrogation happens at the tail-end of the scene in the Sambisa Forest, General Okoye swoops in and dispenses of the last kidnapper. She turns to the newly liberated and warns them to never speak of what they have just experienced. Among quiet but profuse thanks, Okoye blesses the group with the slightest smile that seems to free the people as much as the removal of their physical bonds. In the next scene where Okoye greets the Queen and Shuri, she playfully winks and smiles as she does her duty. This moment is familiar, warm, and freeing. The women of Wakanda have immeasurable affection for one another that is not restricted by caste or profession. Walker says that Womanists love other women without any constraints of sex or romance (Walker, 1983, p. xi).

Loyalty and tradition form, strengthen, and sustain this Love. As the leader of the royal guard, the Dora Milaje, Okoye’s loyalty is tested when “Killmonger” ascends to the Wakandan throne, placing her personal and political beliefs in conflict. In the deleted scene “Okoye and W’Kabi Discuss the Future of Wakanda” (available on Disney+),

Okoye and her lover W’Kabi (a Border Tribe warrior) find themselves on opposing sides of the debate about the definition of Liberation. T’Challa is believed dead by “Killmonger’s” hand in Ritual Combat at this point in the film. W’Kabi justifies his allegiance to “Killmonger” and his dedication to achieving Black Liberation through war. Okoye, though, asks if W’Kabi wants to “bring our children into a world where they are conquerors?” This question calls back to Okoye’s life as a Dora Milaje (the Royal Guard), a role she would abdicate to start a family. Here, she must choose between her lover and her Love for her community.

It might be easy to interpret this exchange as W’Kabi imposing the patriarchy upon his spouse, but this moment should not be dismissed as a simplistic dispute over Okoye’s uterus. Womanism says that Black men and women are equals who must work collaboratively and cooperatively for the community’s wellbeing. Ever the poised military leader, Okoye does not allow her tears to fall despite visibly swallowing her heartbreak. The person she has chosen to share her life with, the person she had chosen to reshape her identity with, does not understand leadership and the meaning of freedom. When War Dogs are routinely sent out from Wakanda to monitor the evils the rest of the world perpetrates against one another, envisioning reformation without genocide seems improbable.

Later, Okoye finds herself at odds with Nakia, whom she often calls her sister. Okoye’s loyalty ties her to the throne and whoever sits upon it. She does not see herself as a change agent the way Nakia does, but it does not make Okoye’s contribution to the wholeness of Wakanda any less valuable. Okoye’s Love for Wakanda literally places her on the front line. In the final battle, Okoye and W’Kabi face off. He tries to plie her

during their standoff, but she does not budge, stating that she would, without question, kill him for the good of Wakanda.

Okoye demonstrates a “cultural independence that breaks with mainstream insistence on division” (Tsuruta, 2012, p. 6). The Love of self and others does not make a Womanist selfish nor selfless. It makes a Womanist human—a human who honors the past while taking steps toward an equitable future.

CONCLUSION

Despite Black-led and produced films historically over-performing studio estimates, executives still consider Black art a risky investment. “As a marginalized group in Hollywood, Black Americans have a restricted ability to control their own self-images or to challenge disparaging stereotypes about themselves—stereotypes that not only influence individual people but also shape crucial social factors such as politics, racial attitudes, and treatment by authority...” (Erigha, 2019, p. 29). *Black Panther* is one of the top-grossing films of all time and might usher in a more equitable future.

The Geena Davis Institute recently released its “Representations of Black Women in Hollywood” study, which examines Black women and girl characters in entertainment during 2019. The report notes that stereotypical representations of Black women in media have real-world implications that have become “invisible norms” by which Black women are measured. “Black women’s perseverance in the face of hardship is seen as normal, which has the effect of erasing the depth of injustices they face on an everyday basis” (“Representations of Black Women in Hollywood,” 2021, p. 2). Black women and girls are subject to public scrutiny and policing designed to control and stymie our freedom

and social mobility (Mako Fitts Ward, 2017). Within the borders of Wakanda, however, those White supremacist limitations do not exist.

Dr. Knatokie Ford tells readers in *Black Girls Rock!* that since 1993 Black women have been the only demographic to decline in numbers in STEM fields and, when speaking on her experience teaching in South Central LA, she calls it “transformative and affirming” (Bond, 2018, pp. 57–58) not just for her, but for the students. She goes on to say:

Black women and girls especially need to see images of themselves in technical roles in all forms of media. For children who do not have access to adults who work as scientists or engineers, media may be their only exposure. It has been underestimated how powerful negative stereotypes are in excluding people or prompting folks to opt-out of the STEM world. [We must] ... liberate ourselves from these images and perceptions that suggested, for centuries, that Black people are not intelligent and do not excel in math and science. (58)

The number of Black women in STEM had been on a steady decline in the years before *Black Panther*'s release in 2018. “Evidence shows that when audiences see on-screen representations of themselves, particularly aspirational ones, that experience can fundamentally change how they perceive their own place in the world”(Hickey, 2018, p. 2). Increased interest in archery after films like *Hunger Games* and *Brave* were released chronicles the real-life impact of representative images. The number of Black women and girls represented on film as smart and/or working in STEM in 2019 was 54.1% and

14.3%, respectively (“Representations of Black Women in Hollywood,” 2021). I believe it is essential to see representation in as many ways as possible. Black women are starving to see our authentic selves on screen. *Black Panther* comes close, I think, to affirming Black women while still meeting the demands of the dominant culture.

Part of the challenge in this endeavor is that *Black Panther* is a distinctly American commodity. As a Black American woman, I received this film in a way that other African women and African women of the Diaspora may not. The examination of intersecting oppressions has fueled Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought and brought forth terms that are now part of our everyday vernacular such as “intersectionality” and “anti-Black racism.” A significant component of what makes the film *Black Panther* such a poignant and important project is that Wakanda provides a respite—a collective psychic relief—from the continued oppressions that Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) experience.

Black women of the Diaspora have been oppressed for centuries, and that oppression has built a structure that keeps Black women at or near the bottom of the societal pecking order. An encounter with a text that shows Black women living free of oppression within their homeland (as in *Black Panther*) becomes an inspiring example of unfettered possibility. It is a summertime cookout that lasts for centuries. It activates our activism to build a liberated future for our children’s children’s children. *Black Panther* presents audiences with a view of Blackness, community, and politics that has never been seen on this scale before. Wakandans are free from Western ideas about their identity. Audre Lorde implored Africans of the Diaspora to experience our ancient selves and

“respect those hidden sources of our power from where the true knowledge, and therefore, lasting action comes” (Lorde, 2016, p. 37).

Black Panther, for me, is proof of what can happen when we have the peace of mind and freedom to pursue our passions. When I left the theater after watching *Black Panther* for the first time, I mourned the girl I used to be before the world made me believe my outsides mattered more than my insides. Like Wakanda, Black Americans have been hidden in plain sight for generations. Four hundred-plus years of living under that shroud have made it seem immovable. *Black Panther*, I think, has strengthened us. More and more of us are lifting together.

Because Womanism focuses on self-determination and community stabilization without mention of oppressions, it does not expend energy on overcoming any patriarchal White supremacist system. Freedom, Womanism posits, comes through self-love and the Love of others. The women of Wakanda provide clear examples of how to live Womanism in our day-to-day lives.

This work is not exhaustive. Further exploration of *Black Panther* as an Afrofuturistic-Womanist film and how the film honors Black female authors like Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison is merited. Additional research about excluding the already marginalized creative voices who provided much of the film’s source material and how that exclusion impacts the cultural criticism that surrounds the film’s popularity, along with Disney’s historically tightly controlled public face is also worth pursuing. However, since the recent national racial reckoning, more Black-helmed projects are receiving

major studio backing while also challenging pervasive White supremacist stereotypes, placing *Black Panther* as a catalyst for change and no longer the sole example.

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