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Divided Crowns: An Ideological Criticism of Self-Black Determination and Conflicting Visions of Wakanda in Black Panther

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Divided Crowns:
An Ideological Criticism of Self-Black Determination and Conflicting Visions of Wakanda in
Black Panther

By

Alaya Hubbard

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Abstract

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2024

Using an ideological criticism of Hollywood's *Black Panther* (2018), this paper analyzes the differing portrayals of the self-Black determination of the film's main characters, T'Challa and Killmonger, as it relates to their backgrounds, cultural connections, racial identities, power dynamics, and their fights for social justice. Aspects of the film that were analyzed included characters' actions, dialogue, lore, and presence. Digging deeper into the film's story once key themes were revealed. This examination included parallels to the real-world, including locations, social movements, and social reformation leaders. The goal of the paper is to show how the film offers insights into broader issues of identity, culture, power, and social justice.

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CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM

Introduction

One of the more positive highlights of 2018 included the release of Marvel Cinematic Universe's (MCU) *Black Panther*. With elements of blaxploitation, Afrofuturism, and gender equality, the film became a cultural phenomenon. Blaxploitation is a film genre targeted toward the Black community, focusing on Black-centered narratives and its representation of Black political and social issues (Song, 2023). Blaxploitation films are still popular for modern Black audiences, thanks to television channels such as the Black Entertainment Network (B.E.T.), the Oprah Winfrey Network (O.W.N.), and TV One. Afrofuturism is an expression of Black identity and freedom through art and other creative works, most notably science fiction and fantasy (Song, 2023). Representations include mixing African culture, like clothing and rituals, along with technology. Creators use Afrofuturism to reimagine a Black nation free from the influence of white hegemony.

With many fantastical elements, the film divulges in different representations of cultural pride and racial identity. The release of the film was not only significant in cinematic history but also reflected the cultural and racial dynamics in the United States (U.S.) at that time. Building on the momentum of social and political events of 2018, the release of *Black Panther (2018)* represented the growing demand for representation and inclusion in mainstream media and challenged the conventional narratives of Hollywood by igniting a sense of pride and empowerment of marginalized communities, especially Black audiences who were able to see themselves portrayed in powerful, dynamic, and self-determined ways. This resonated with 'self-Black determination', a movement emphasizing the dynamics of Black self-reliance, cultural identity, and agency. By portraying a thriving, technologically advanced Black nation, the film

showcased Black excellence and self-sufficiency, a core tenant of the self-Black determination movement, and catalyzed important conversations and discussions about representation, diversity, and the power of storytelling to shape perceptions and challenge societal norms.

Statement of Problem

By analyzing the film, the study will address how T'Challa and Killmonger represent different approaches to “self-Black determination”, how their backgrounds and choices influence their cultural pride and racial identity, and how the film offers insights into broader issues of identity, culture, power, and social justice.

Key Terms

- I. Self-Black determination: Black people coming together to accomplish their own goals without relying on others by taking control of their destiny and building their community in their quest for social, political, and economic justice (Jones, 2017, p.14; Ogbar, 1982, p.11).
- II. Social justice: the fairness of social institutions in distributing resources and positions within a society. It emphasizes addressing poverty and inequality as a matter of justice, not charity (Reisch, 2014, p. 1-5).
- III. Isolationism: a country's policy to stay out of international conflict and alliances, instead focusing on their own issues and security (Braumoeller, 2010, p.8)
- IV. Cultural pluralism: smaller groups in a large society can keep their cultural identity and their values and practices are accepted by the dominant culture of society (Stent et al., 1973, p. 13)
- V. Culture: the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the

universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. Culture is learned, not inherited so it comes from a person's social environment (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 5)

- VI. Separatism: the belief that a group of people with a distinct identity should have their own independent state (Kobayashi, 2020).
- VII. Black nationalism: advocacy for economic self-sufficiency, race pride for African Americans, and Black separatism ("Black nationalism", n.d.)
- VIII. Racial identity: the personal meaning and significance of a person's race and their effort to integrate their desire for belonging within larger society with the needs and expectations of their racial group (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995, p. 903; Sellers et al., 1998)
- IX. Cultural disconnect: alienation experienced by individuals when they are separated from their previous cultural groups (Speller & Twigger-Ross, 2009, p. 357)

Film Background and Summary

Black Panther tells the story of the newly crowned King T'Challa of the fictional, uncolonized African country, Wakanda. Unknown to the rest of the world, Wakanda is a technologically advanced country due to the strongest metal in the world, vibranium, existing in the region. At the beginning of his reign, T'Challa finds out about his long-lost cousin, Erik "Killmonger" Stevens (formerly: N'Jadaka, usually referred to as "Killmonger"). In a quest for revenge for the destruction of his childhood, Killmonger overthrows T'Challa and orders the delivery of weapons of mass destruction to Wakandan spies overseas. With the assistance of his partner, Nakia, his sister, Shuri, American CIA agent, Everett Ross, and the Jabari Tribe, T'Challa kills Killmonger and decides to reveal Wakanda's capabilities to the rest of the world (Coogler, 2018).

Black Panther grossed \$202 million during its domestic opening weekend with an overall worldwide gross of \$1.3 billion during its theater run (“Black Panther”, n.d.). During its run, *Black Panther* became the highest-grossing solo superhero film and one of the top ten highest grossing films of all time (McClintock, 2018; Tartaglione, 2018). As of April 2024, *Black Panther* is the sixth-highest grossing film in the MCU and the nineteenth-highest grossing film of all time (“Top lifetime grosses,” n.d.). *Black Panther* has won over 120 awards for its acting, storytelling, costuming, music, and production. Some of the most notable awards include: Best Costume Design at the 2019 Academy Awards, Outstanding Motion Picture at the 2019 NAACP Image Awards, Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture at the 2019 Screen Actors Guild Awards, and a Grammy for Best Score Soundtrack for Visual Media (“Awards for Black Panther,” n.d.).

Significance of Study

Black Panther sheds a rare light on the pride of the uncolonized in comparison to the cultural disconnect of the colonized. The two main characters, T’Challa and Killmonger, have two different backgrounds and connections to Wakanda and the outside world. T’Challa is the king of an uncolonized country with a rich history, whereas Killmonger is an African-American seeking revenge. Killmonger is physically disconnected from his Wakandan culture early in his life and his portrayal embodies the struggle of those who do not have a direct connection to their ancestry. Speller and Twigger-Ross (2009) explain that when a person is physically removed from a location they associate with their cultural identity, they start to lose their cultural identity and suffer from a cultural disconnection. These people no longer have full access to the shared customs, traditions, beliefs, or values of their cultural group. This leads to alienation and a decline in the sense of community. In contrast to Killmonger, T’Challa represents cultural pride

and resilience, having a deep understanding and appreciation for his heritage. He is a representation of the power that comes from having a direct connection to one's ancestral roots. By studying both portrayals, researchers can gain insight into the lasting effects of colonization and the physical removal of a group of people from their ancestral community.

The film's release made cinematic history while reflecting the cultural and racial dynamics in the U.S. at the time. The film features an African king which contrasts with traditional narratives of royalty and power in the U.S. This is similar to the real life event happening during the film's release, Meghan, Duchess of Sussex (née Markle) marrying into the British monarchy. Meghan faced extreme backlash for her relationship and marriage with Prince Harry due to her race and background ("Statement by the Communications Secretary to Prince Harry," 2016; Wilson, 2017) Within seemingly progressive institutions, her experiences highlighted the challenges of diversity and inclusion within the scope of cultural identity and family acceptance. Additionally, the release of *Black Panther* coincided with the family separation crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border, due to former President Trump's "zero-tolerance" policy against illegal border crossings (Domonoske & Gonzales, 2018). *Black Panther's* storyline emphasizes cultural identity, the importance of family, and heritage during a time of forced familial separation. Unlike the political landscape at the time of the film's release, *Black Panther* offered a new perspective on the importance of family unity.

The film catalyzed important conversations about representation, diversity, and the power of storytelling to shape perceptions and challenge societal norms. This resonated with a growing audience demand for inclusivity in American cinema. 2018 marked a turning point, as shown by a study from the University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. Compared to previous years, the year's top films showcased a significant increase in female and minority

lead roles (Smith et al., 2019). This shift suggested that filmmakers were listening to audiences to create films that more accurately represented our diverse society. Stacy L. Smith, Director of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative remarked that, “2018 offers hope that industry members have taken action to create content that better reflects the world in which we live, and the box office seems to have rewarded them for it” (Coyle, 2019). Beyond the statistics, *Black Panther* inspired the masses. The film became a symbol of empowerment, particularly for young audiences. Furthermore, *Black Panther* introduced audiences to Afrofuturism, a genre where Black people use technology to become leaders of their world (Fitzpatrick, 2018). This exposure broadened perspectives and also challenged the traditional narratives about the intersection of the future and Black representation. These shifts were significant steps toward a more inclusive and reflective film industry.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this paper is on T'Challa and Killmonger's backgrounds which are a representation of self-Black determination, and how their racial identity relates to their cultural pride and social justice. Using a multifaceted approach as the conceptual framework by utilizing a combination of historical context, media analysis, and various social and political theories for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the film's themes. Additionally, using a historical reference, the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, to understand the social justice aspects, and media references will be used to understand representations of racial and cultural identities, social justice, and power dynamics in American film and television. Specific theories being applied include Locke's social contract theory, Madison's Anti-Racist White Hero (ARWH) genre, Foucault's panoptical observation, Barkan's collective behavior theory, McCarthy's resource mobilization theory, and McAdam's political process theory. The concepts this paper will investigate include self-Black determination, racial identity, cultural pride, and social justice.

Comic Book Background

The superhero, Black Panther, first appeared in the comic, *Fantastic Four #52*, released in July 1966, becoming the first mainstream superhero of African descent. Black Panther, or T'Challa, is the protector of a fictional African country, Wakanda, home to the strongest metal known to man, vibranium. The vibranium has helped Wakanda become a technologically advanced society, surpassing the advancements of the Western world (Morris, 2022). To protect the nation from the outside world, Wakanda has always been described as hidden, whether in a remote jungle, underground, or behind a force field. Predating the Oakland Black Panther

resistance party by a few months, the MCU Black Panther is unique. However, creator Stan Lee claims that the similar names are just a coincidence (Mitchell, 2023).

Appearing in a myriad of Marvel comic series, Black Panther didn't receive his starring feature until the 1970s in *Jungle Action*. In this feature, the "Panther's Rage" arc explored the intricacies of Wakanda and its people. After the series was discontinued due to low sales, Black Panther became a self-titled mini-series, *Black Panther Vol. 2*, in the late 1980s. The 1998 *Black Panther Vol. 3*, is where readers are introduced to notable Marvel villains, like Erik Killmonger (Morse, 2020; Stewart, 2008).

Representation of Racial and Cultural Identities

The U.S. media has entrenched whiteness as the societal norm, resulting in the categorization of individuals of color as inherently "other" due to their nonwhite identity. This normative portrayal extends to Hollywood's cosmetic industry, illustrated by the Powder Puff Wars between Elizabeth Arden and Max Factor during the shift from Black and white films to Technicolor. Including its higher price point, Arden cosmetics lost due to its darkening effect on light skin tones, reinforcing the association of whiteness with a purported "natural" appearance. Conversely, Factor cosmetics, dominating the market, offered a lower price point but lacked shades for nonwhite consumers (Dootson, 2016). The exclusion of actors of color in cosmetic shade ranges signifies a broader issue—the marginalization of people of color on screen, impeding their ability to share their stories and experiences. The exclusion of people of color in makeup shades isn't a coincidence or accidental; it's a reflection of whiteness being the norm throughout history and is being reflected in Hollywood.

The marginalization of people of color can be traced back to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, where its legacy is still evident in Latinidad culture. The historical importation of African

slaves to the Spanish Caribbean has contributed to perceiving people of African descent as foreign and other in Latinidad culture, a perspective that persists in the U.S. Latinidad culture in the U.S. that captures the experiences and identities of Latinas/os, shaped by both historical power structures and the evolving demands of multiculturalism. The complex concept is a constant negotiation with racial categories and allows some Black Latinidad actors to navigate racial identity for financial gain. Black Latinidad actors navigate racial flexibility to bolster their acting opportunities and raise their racial capital. Neoliberal multiculturalism treats an actor's racial and ethnic identity as a commodity, managing global racial differences while privileging whiteness. In the U.S. Census Latinidads are not recognized in their racial category and must identify as white or Black. Similar to white people, Latinidads with a lighter complexion receive more acting opportunities and the ability to tell their own stories compared to Black Latinidads who act in the space of Blackness. Notably, figures like Zoe Saldana exemplify neoliberal multiculturalism, as she is cast as either a Black character or a Latina character, avoiding the designation of a Black Latina and allowing her to navigate multiple racial spaces to accumulate more racial capital (Molina-Guzman, 2013).

Even when acting roles are available to Black people, they are still unable to tell their stories due to the erasure of the Black body. Seen especially in Black women, Black bodies are viewed in the eyes of and are compared to white bodies. Historically, Black women have been represented as an “other” in comparison to white women in American films, with the usual characteristic of a mammy (laborer), jezebel (sex object), or, recently, a sassy Black woman. In Disney’s *Princess and the Frog*, the main character Tiana’s Black body is erased for most of the film by transforming her character into a frog. Her white best friend, Lottie, a caricature of past Disney princesses, maintains her body for the film. Moffitt (2019) points out that through camera

positioning, frame design, and outfits, Lottie demands attention on the screen to the point of being the main character herself. Tiana is the princess in the title, but Lottie is the princess of the movie, reaffirmed in every scene. Tiana is the first and only Disney princess with a job who dreamed of labor while Lottie has every advantage available.

As the dystopian genre of science fiction has emerged in the last twenty years, the presence of African American characters and actors portraying storylines looking to the future or the idea of the impossible are still seen in the societal context of the past and present. The genre has persistently represented African-Americans as “other” in futuristic stories, reinforcing racial power dynamics where whiteness is the norm and Blackness is different. With our media serving as an extension of our human senses, screenwriters reinforce these categories of time within what is known as the generation starship genre. Coined by Tsiolkovsky, generation starship is focused on solving the issue of sending spaceships between stars for voyages that expand multiple human lifetimes. Aspects of U.S. history become a recurring theme such as the colonial trope, reminiscent of the 1800s, is a popular aspect of science fiction, especially in television. In the CW Network’s *The 100*, the remains of humanity live on a spaceship called the Ark. The adult leaders on the spaceship send down unruly teenagers to Earth to see if it is habitable for future generations. Soon after landing, the Ark teenagers come into conflict with the “Grounders”, Earth’s other survivors. The “Grounders” are portrayed as having brown skin with white spots and, inherently, “other” compared to the mostly white Ark teenagers (Avi Brooks et al. 2016). By positioning the Grounders as a type of “other”, the screenwriters were able to pose them as an obstacle to be overcome by the white main character. Although the Grounders are the natives of the land, the main character's goal is to make that land the Ark’s. This situation is reminiscent of American colonization and interactions between the Europeans and the Indigenous people.

Brooks et al. (2016) introduce the colonial trope as positioning the non-natives as the real “other”. The non-natives' journey alone makes them the “other” of the story. Considering the trans-Atlantic slave trade, people of African descent became “others” the moment they were on the boats.

By holding onto their Earthly baggage, screenwriters reinforce an unequal society plagued by miscommunication. In science fiction, anything is possible, yet creators are holding onto issues that plague society. Communication is one of the few ways to alleviate fears of the unknown and to make societal advancements. Miscommunication sets society back, unable to move forward. In *The 100*, humans on the Ark didn't have any communication with possible survivors on Earth and didn't know the Grounders existed. If communication between the two parties existed, the people of the Ark would have known Earth was inhabitable because the Grounders had already figured out how to make it so. Also, it could have helped the Grounders be seen more as friends than foes. Similar to *The 100*, 2014's *Ascension* sees mankind seemingly going into space, but continuing the racial conflicts from past society on Earth. The premise of 2014's *Ascension* includes white and Black people from the 1960s under the Kennedy Administration going to space. Fifty years later, with little communication from Earth, the social structure of the spaceship is similar to the 1960s with inequality of the races clearly visible. White people get to live on the top floor of the spaceship with more important jobs, while Black people work physical labor jobs and reside on the bottom deck. By the end of the show, it turns out the entire spaceship was a social experiment that never left Earth. By not having communication with Earth, the social changes that happened on Earth were not reflective of what was happening on the spaceship and left the members of the ship socially back in time. To resist being considered alien, Black bodies must conform to society's norms and be supported by a

white body, through the passing of the mantle. By passing on the story or legacy from a white character to a Black character, mainstream audiences can become more comfortable with the change of narrative. In *Princess and the Frog*, a notable scene at the beginning of the movie includes Lottie, who has reaffirmed she is a princess through the movie, placing a tiara on Tiana's head. This act signifies to the audience that Tiana is the princess of the movie and gives it a stamp of approval (Moffitt, 2019). With a stamp of approval from the past, narratives are allowed to expand beyond the original stories and cover new grounds. Hollywood has capitalized on the passing of the mantle in legacy film series, such as *Star Wars*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Rocky*. Characteristics of the legacy film include (1) the former main character returning to the series, (2) the former main character passing the torch to an up-and-coming actor, (3) a repetition of the former main character's story through the new main character, (4) a handover moment, and (5) the walking away of the former main character. The *Rocky* film series introduced its first legacy film, *Creed* in 2015 where Sylvester Stallone's Rocky passed the mantle to Michael B. Jordan's Adonis Johnson. By giving their seal of approval through a handoff, Hollywood can keep old franchises profitable but more relevant to current audiences (Golding, 2019).

Despite being part of a country with a reputation for being one of the most racially and culturally diverse populations, Hollywood has a long history of portraying nonwhite characters as static, cultural stereotypes. These portrayals do not provide representations of dynamic personalities within existing cultures.

Theories of Racial Representation in Media

With portrayals of whiteness being the default in Hollywood cinema, going outside that parameter is no easy feat. According to Clark's Stage Model of Representation there are four stages of how the media represents various social groups (Dixon et al., 2019). The first stage is invisibility, seen by members of the social group rarely being on screen if at all. The second

stage is ridicule where members of the social group are being portrayed according to a cultural stereotype. The third stage is regulation, members of the social group upholding some form of social order. Finally, the fourth stage is respect, with members of the social group being portrayed in diverse and nuanced roles. Mapping out where certain racial groups land, Dixon has determined whites are predominantly at the respect stages, Latinos go in between invisibility and ridicule, and Blacks are between ridicule and regulation (Dixon et al., 2019).

By having specific types of portrayals available to different racial groups, those portrayals will indirectly affect other members of the same racial group by bringing the question of their legitimacy in society. To achieve legitimation, a person must first be recognized as existing either through interpersonal or impersonal communication. Psychologist William James speaks to the power of being acknowledged with, “A man’s social “me” is the recognition which he gets from his mates.... No more fiendish punishment could be devised than that one should be turned loose in society and remain unnoticed by all the members thereof” (Epps & Clark, 1973). The second stage of legitimation is being respected. Legitimation can’t have respect without recognition, but recognition alone isn’t enough to be legitimized.

As media is a representation of what current actions and thoughts are running through society, it could give an accurate representation of certain racial groups being ignored by their society. For example, the “silent Black majority”, is members of the working class who, like the members of the silent white majority, are just looking for ways to survive and be financially stable. They want a peaceful life without violence and a better future for their children. They are already angry about the treatment of Blacks in the U.S. and want to see its end, but they are not willing to risk everything to revolt. Members of the silent Black majority are not represented on television or portrayed as successful in life (Epps & Hamilton, 1973, p.281). In the history of

primetime television, usually, Black representation correlates with the Black population of the U.S. Most Black characters exist in situational comedies and are primarily portrayed as Black females. With the decline of situational comedies and the rise of action and crime programming, Black representation in primetime television has decreased (Dixon et al., 2019).

It is debatable whether being in the second stage of ridicule is better than being invisible. When actors of a certain race are only offered stereotypical roles, there's little choice but to accept the role. Sometimes portraying stereotypical roles is the opportunity the actor needs to be pushed into the third stage of regulation. Another debatable qualm is whether the actor creates a popular and financially successful portrayal of a cultural stereotype, leading that character to represent an entire culture. Humans make quick judgments by creating mental shortcuts. So, if a nonBlack person is constantly exposed to media representations of Black men as drug dealers, the person can end up thinking that all Black men are drug dealers or criminals (Dixon et al., 2019).

The movement between representation stages can also be understood through John Turner's Social Categorization Theory, the more important a group is to a person, the more likely they are to favor the group. When a person encounters a non-member of the group through media, their favoritism towards their group can strengthen (Dixon et al., 2019). As stereotypes are a form of mental shortcut, members of a group will be included in a social categorization, regardless of desire. The regulation of roles offered to actors of different groups feeds into the non-member group bias and reinforcement of stereotypes. If the actor can portray the stereotypical character through nuance and depth, they might be able to move into the third and fourth stages.

Racial and Cultural Disconnection

By forcibly removing someone from their source of cultural connection, whether it be their community or familiar environment, they become culturally disconnected and lose vital aspects of their identity. The community in which a person is raised or grows in, helps them develop an identity within that community's culture, shaping a sense of belonging and understanding. When the person is removed from the community, it is more difficult to continue a cultural connection. Speller and Twigger-Ross (2009) studied the forced relocation of a traditional English coal mining community and their relocations. The study revealed that the relocation led to reduced connection and information flow, leading to isolation and weakened social support. This study highlighted the critical role of community in fostering and sustaining cultural bonds.

However, cultural disconnection creates new people with new identities. Entering new situations exposes us to different norms and values, prompting personal growth and adaptation. With new rules and behavior norms, there is a change in values, priorities, and lifestyles following a relocation. This can involve a shift in behavior patterns and social interactions, potentially leading to a sense of cultural disconnection (Speller & Twigger-Ross, 2009).

With exposure to different cultures, people begin to transition away from their traditional cultural systems at a faster rate. People are a product of their environment and with new environments, they begin to adopt behaviors that help them survive their new environment. In a qualitative study of the Lodha tribal community and the impact of new media consumption on tribal youth, results indicated a direct link between new media consumption and cultural disconnection among the Lodha youths (Chattopadhyay & Mohanty, 2022, p.143-144). The youths are suddenly being exposed to the rest of the world at the touch of a button, a stark

contrast from their previous generations. As they are exposed to more cultures, the youth transform with greater aspirations for more media consumption and commercialization of the tribe's cultural traditions.

Power Dynamics in American Film

Power dynamics in U.S. films concern masculinity and the patriarchy. Ghofrani (2023) emphasizes that the media is an extension of society and its expectations, in which the white man holds a dominant position. Patriarchal hegemony is when the prevailing legitimate power from the ideal form of masculinity produces a hierarchy, positioning other forms of masculinity and femininity as less than the ideal form of masculinity. Few men should possess the ideal form of masculinity (p. 3). Men receive their power from patriarchal hegemony and the more of a "man" they are, or the more masculine they are, the more power the man receives. Hollywood cinema, including action movies, reinforces the male main character as hyper-masculine and holding the power to impact the world, or at least the power to control their reality.

White male privilege has had social power over other minorities, protecting white masculinity. White masculinity is the norm for power dynamics in film, so minority masculinity or power is considered abnormal. By painting white men in power as the norm, there is less consideration towards stereotypes of minorities. Stereotypes of women include being powerless so a female main character in power is considered revolutionary because it isn't normalized. A man being powerless is usually framed as the result of female power of subordination; the man has taken on the feminine role of being powerless (Ghofrani, 2023; Wardaningsih & Kasih, 2022).

Superhero films portray heroes and villains as having more power than the average man. Heroes are not portrayed as the average person, although some claim they want to be. Heroes

have a larger responsibility than the average person and must have powers that would be inaccessible to the average person. Villains can cause greater mass destruction than the average person. Many superhero and villain origin stories involve some way they gained extraordinary powers. The Joker fell into a vat of radioactive material, Spiderman was bitten by a radioactive spider, and Static Shock had his genetic material transformed by a toxic gas. By looking at these few examples, none of the situations that presented the heroes or villains with their powers are readily available to the average person. Even if there isn't access to a vat of toxic material or a bite from an alien bug, heroes can still be created through a different source of power, money. Money helps develop intelligence and technology that has granted many superheroes their power. Films have shown rich heroes as gaining their power from panoptical observation. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1977)* explains the panoptical prison where cells are circular so one guard can observe multiple prisoners. Cantaş and Can (2022) expand on the architectural structure by noting the normalization of heroes using panoptical observation of the masses. Rich heroes can normalize their power because they have access to information the average person does not have. Batman and Iron Man are the most popular examples of using their larger-than-life financial resources to develop technology that is hidden from the masses for their personal use. Both can observe their cities without being seen and make judgments on whether someone has to be punished. In *Captain America: Civil War*, Iron Man was moving faster than he could observe the situation and his suit, funded by his extraordinary wealth, was able to tell him who was an enemy and deserved to die. Superheroes who do not have the same level of wealth as Iron Man had no choice but to move slower so they could observe and react to the situations they were in.

Social Justice in American Film

In examining the film's portrayal of social justice, it is important to understand the significance of the concept. Social justice is the pursuit of eliminating inequality and making the right to live accessible to all people. Rawls (1971) argues in *A Theory of Justice* that by building on John Locke's social contract theory, he can develop social justice principles in which people who are free and rational will come together, equally. Social justice is connected to a person's social identity because it is closely related to societal ethical norms and the rights people have determine how they move through society. Rawls introduces two principles of social justice: (1) everyone should have the same rights and responsibilities and (2) some people can have more resources and power if they are helping the less fortunate.

As modern film deals with the topic of social justice, particularly the image of violent social justice, it's important to examine how films approach the concept. The film, *Joker* (2019), portrays the social movements of a garbage strike, through the eyes of Arthur Fleck, a financially disadvantaged, mentally ill man. The film shows affluent areas of the city of Gotham full of trash. Information about the garbage strike is given through the mass media but without mention of the garbage collectors' demands. Although Fleck has no connection to the garbage strike, his string of murders of Wall Street businessmen became an inspiration to the movement. The film never mentions within the main storyline if the garbage collectors' demands are met but portrays the movement as chaotic, violent, and destructive. Çöteli (2020) uses the film as a lens to scrutinize the perspectives of those in power and their view of how an individual's right to live is linked to their productivity.

Although social justice encompasses more than just economic stability, such as food and shelter, its relationship to race is what is most often explored in film. When dealing with race and

the fight for equality, Hollywood has used the “Anti-Racist White Hero” (ARWH) genre to avoid the white guilt. Coined by Madison (1999), the ARWH narrative has five elements within its structure: the white hero faces some form of racism, develops an anti-racist view, makes a serious sacrifice due to white racists, takes a leadership role in Black liberation, and prevails in the end. By using a white protagonist as a leader in social movements like Black liberation, Hollywood can avoid the discomfort of white viewers at the expense of putting the real victims in a supporting role (George, 2011). Modern examples of the ARWH in films include *The Help* (2011), where a white woman publishes a book on the experiences of Black maids in the south and *Avatar* (2009), a white man who joins a native tribe and becomes a prominent leader.

When it comes to representations of past social movements that have happened in history, there is more pressure to be a commercial success while dealing with racism. In 1992, *Malcolm X* was released, acquiring great reviews and successful box office performance. Telling the life of activist Malcolm X was no easy feat due to his radical ideas. The film downplays his radical views to give him a new image and more palatable for broader audiences. This has become a common practice in the film industry and has directly affected how some people are remembered (Bogle, 1996; Dyson, 1995, Winn, 2001).

Structuring Social Reformation in History

During the Civil Rights Movement, the call for isolationism as a response to social injustice was not a popular one. Notable civil rights leaders more often called for pride in having African ancestry, unification of different racial groups, and fair treatment among different racial groups. The closest calls for isolationism would be Black nationalism, cultural pluralism, and separatism. Isolationism is regarding a country’s foreign policy whereas Black nationalism,

cultural pluralism, and separatism delve into the inner workings of a nation, society, or community.

While isolationism and cultural pluralism have similar goals of the preservation of identity and an emphasis on autonomy, cultural pluralism encourages engagement and interaction between diverse cultures in a society. Occasionally confused as an isolationist, W.E.B. Du Bois promotes Black political solidarity to achieve social justice for Blacks that aligns with American ideals (“W.E.B. Du Bois”, 2017). During the Jim Crow era, Du Bois's” *The Souls of Black Folks*, advocated for Black people to assimilate into modern times while keeping their spiritual identity and for the Black elite to take control in politics affecting Black people and uniting Black people. By placing the Black elite in control of the Black community, Du Bois puts heavy influence on the elites to guide the community. This is an interesting view considering Freire (1972) who vehemently criticizes the notion of elite influence over the masses. He considered charity as a tool for controlling the oppressed and that true liberation will not come from handouts.

In the last few centuries, Black nationalism gained popular influence through organizations like the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the Nation of Islam (NOI). Black nationalism focuses on the creation of a better future for African Americans in comparison with other races. In the nineteenth century, abolitionist Martin Delany promoted the movement of free Blacks to Africa to assist in the building of the nation, in hopes of uplifting the status and condition of African Americans. By the twentieth century, Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican immigrant and founder of UNIA became a strong influence on Black nationalism. In the *Declaration of the Rights of Negro Peoples of the World*, Garvey called for Black people to go back to their ancestral homes in Africa, for economic independence, and for there to be a

Black government to serve and protect Black people of the world (Garvey, 1920; *Black Nationalism*, n.d.). Although Garvey is easily misidentified as an isolationist, his messages were focused on the promotion and well-being of Black people and Africa.

The NOI took a radical and more isolationist stance by promoting separatism and an economically self-sufficient Black economy. This differed from UNIA for UNIA promoted economic independence alongside other races, not a separate economy. During the 1950s, Malcolm X was a minister for the organization who criticized other civil rights leaders for working in cooperation with whites (*Black Nationalism*, n.d.). Instead of promoting isolationism, Malcolm X promoted separatism and an independent Black state. Malcolm X (1964, as cited in *The ballot or the bullet*, 2018) called for African Americans to stop letting white saviors make decisions about how African Americans should be treated and, through economic self-determination, calling on African Americans to create their own, separate economy.

Achieving Social Justice in History

Social justice movements are not simple acts, they are thought out and meticulous in their quest for lasting change. Originally viewed through the lens of collective behavior theory, contemporary sociologists negatively viewed social movements as irrational, spontaneous, and undemocratic. Collective behavior theory is a term for a set of behaviors by a group being somewhat planned and somewhat organized, but less organized compared to conventional behavior. Barkan (2013) includes examples of collective behavior to include riots, mobs, fads, and crazes whereas conventional behavior is how one acts in the classroom or workplace.

The first step to a social justice movement is a group of people feeling oppressed. Social justice movements have existed ever since groups of people have been oppressed and their practices continue to circulate. Key tactics include boycotts from the Irish against British

colonialism, hunger strikes from India and Ireland, and nonviolent direct action from South Africa and India.

When planning a social movement, tactics used are important to consider because they will determine the image of the movement and its people. Arguably the most popular tactic in American social justice movements would be nonviolent direct action. The 1960s Civil Rights Movement received great support from Black churches and the use of nonviolence aligns with their values. Other benefits of nonviolent direct action include sympathy and outrage from external groups. As Martin Luther King, Jr. (1964) writes in his open letter from the Birmingham jail cell:

Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored (p.3)

Nonviolent direct action is enough to make viewers uncomfortable, especially when those protestors suffer from violent responses. The violent responses are then less effective and less rational by global viewers. As Morris (2021) points out, the sympathy and support of the global community forces governments to make changes and save face. “Injustice generates anger... Love and empathy can be evoked to build solidarity and trust...” The philosophy emphasizes the power of nonviolence and how those who use nonviolence can expose their oppressors and rally the public to their cause.

Using the 1960s Civil Rights Movement as an example, nonviolent protests used tactics such as bus boycotts, marching, and sit-ins at restaurants. Those protestors were beaten, sprayed with hoses, and had vicious dogs released on them. With the Cold War taking place at the same

time, the U.S. was seen as a mockery because the country's image was of an ideal democratic system yet was violently punishing peaceful citizens.

Although well-planned tactics can help gain sympathizers for a social movement, successful movements also need political opportunities, resources, and timing. Morris (2021) highlights the resource mobilization theory and political process theory. Developed by John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, resource mobilization theory argues money, organization, and leadership from affluent groups are more important than the issues of marginalized people. Developed by Douglas McAdam, the political process theory argues social movements are struggles for the power to change oppressive social conditions. Since movements don't have access to the political processes that create change, their actions are conflicts against authorities that are only effective with organization and strategy. Social movements are too weak on their own so their timing must be tied to an event, like the Black Lives Matter movement coming out after the killing of Trayvon Martin. Dealing with more than the unjust killing of Black people at the hands of police, Black Lives Matter advocates for systemic change in the prison system, healthcare system, and wealth gap where Black people were far more disadvantaged compared to white people.

To make social movements sustainable, they cannot be connected to a single leader. Humans are mortal, but ideas are eternal. By having the movement represented by an ideal instead of a person, the demand for change can continue well after the death of the leader the movement was fashioned (Morris, 2022). After the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X (1968 and 1965), supporters of the Civil Rights Movement were disappointed and lost. Through the support and advocacy of their wives, Coretta Scott King and Betty Shabazz,

respectively, and other leaders, the Civil Rights Movement continued well past the lives of their husbands.

Summary

After examining the history of Black Panther as a character, the literature broadens its scope into history and the media. It dives into several key themes of (1) representation of race and culture in American film, (2) cultural disconnection, (3) portrayals of social justice in American film, (4) portrayals of power dynamics in American film, and (5) structuring social change. Overall, the literature review sheds light on the complex relationship between representation, social justice, and cultural identity in various media, leaving readers with a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities of building a more equitable world.

Nonwhite actors struggle to find acting roles as whiteness is considered the norm in casting. The marginalization can be seen in the Hollywood beauty industry where products were catered to lighter skin tones, with darker skin tones being scarce. This instance shows there were so few nonwhite actors of darker complexion, it wasn't considered necessary to make sure they had makeup that matched their skin tone on set. Even when nonwhite actors are included in Hollywood roles, they face limitations and must cater to racial ambiguity to gain opportunities or take on stereotypical roles.

The lack of genuine representation reinforces negative stereotypes of those with darker complexions and hinders progress both on and off-screen. For example, science fiction is a genre in which anything is possible in terms of story-building and world creation. Yet, the genre often repeats colonial tropes, having people of color exist as threats to white characters. The lack of communication between racial groups in media reflects and reinforces divisions within society.

Progress needs to be made in Hollywood cinema and there have been examples of progress that is designed to be palatable content for general audiences. One example seen in both *Creed (2015)* and *The Princess and the Frog (2009)* is the “passing of the mantle”, where a white character approves the narrative shift to a character of color. This is a start towards progress, but Hollywood needs to move beyond the limitations of stereotypes and introduce diverse portrayals that reflect the richness of nonwhite cultures.

To be abandoned or forced to leave your cultural community can be isolating and lead to the loss of your cultural identity. Although there is a loss, it can also lead to personal growth and adaptation as you encounter new norms and values within your new cultural community. This shift can cause people to move away from tradition and adopt new behaviors to survive in their new surroundings

Hollywood films reflect and reinforce societal power structures rooted in masculinity. White men are usually cast as powerful heroes whereas minorities and women are relegated to less powerful roles. Superhero films are one of the biggest perpetrators of this structure by giving power and resources to those with superhuman abilities or unimaginable wealth, creating a disconnect between the hero and the average person.

Social justice is about fairness and equal access to a good life. Simply, it is everyone having the right to live. Films portray the fight for social justice in many ways, such as the *Joker (2019)* having an uprising due to economic equality. Another common theme in social justice is race, where Hollywood uses white heroes fighting for social justice on the behalf of nonwhite characters to avoid making viewers uncomfortable. Race is a sensitive topic for general audiences, but those movies can perform well at the box office. Despite great revenues, the

monetary goal of production studios can lead to films about historical social justice movements prioritizing commercial success over historical accuracy.

Social justice movements are complex, requiring careful planning for lasting change. Originally, sociologists viewed these movements as irrational and disorganized, despite having histories as long as oppression itself.

Movements for social justice use various tactics to achieve their goals and then spread to other movements for reuse. A popular tactic in the U.S. is nonviolent direct action. One of the most popular instances of use was during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement where this tactic was able to garner sympathy and support for the protestors from the rest of the world while turning a critical eye to those in power.

While tactics are important for visibility and legitimacy, there are other factors needed for success: political opportunities, resources, and timing. Movements need to be relevant to the current political climate to enact changes, along with resources and structured organization to sustain themselves over a long period of time. Timing of the movement is also critical as movements gain momentum when they are relevant to specific events. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement emerged after the killing of an unarmed, Black boy, Trayvon Martin.

Finally, social movements should not rely on a fixed singular leader or group of leaders. By basing movements on mortal people, the movement can only last for as long as the leaders are alive. Movements that are focused on ideals are more likely to last because ideas are eternal and continue the movement after the passing of a charismatic leader.

Overall, the literature review sheds light on the complex relationship between representation, social justice, and cultural identity in various media, leaving readers with a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities of building a more equitable world.

CHAPTER 3: THESIS STATEMENT

Black Panther's contrasting portrayals of T'Challa and Killmonger, embodying distinct approaches to self-Black determination, illuminate the complex relationship between racial identity, cultural disconnect and pride, and social justice, demonstrating that neither character offers a perfect solution, but rather highlights the multifaceted nature of achieving liberation.

This is not a traditional experiment, so variables are not manipulated and measured for cause-and-effect relationships. Instead, the thesis explores the interrelationships between self-Black determination, racial and cultural identity, and social justice.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

To gain a greater understanding of *Black Panther*, this paper will use ideological criticism because it allows us to unmask the hidden messages and complexities embedded in the film's narrative, characters, and language. Additionally, we can look beyond the superhero action scenes and examine how the film is tackling real-world issues, especially as it comes to systematic racism, resource exploitation, and Black identity. By applying this method of analysis, we can uncover the hidden messages within the film and further understand its cultural significance. While the film is created for mainstream audiences and must stand together with other superhero films in the MCU, it also goes against societal norms. An ideological criticism allows us to appreciate the film beyond its fantastical level and more into its bold stance on race, politics, and responsibility.

Positionality

Being an African American female who is a fan of superhero films, I bring a unique lens to this ideological analysis of *Black Panther*. While my excitement towards the film might influence whether I view the film as worthy of analysis, I aim to expand my view through research of scholarly articles and different perspectives. I recognize my connection with the portrayal of Black people in film and its lack of representation, which makes me acknowledge this potential bias.

Additionally, my background from Oakland, CA shapes my understanding of Killmonger's character and motivations. Seeing parallels between his experiences and the experiences of the community allows me to empathize with his actions and motivations, even when they are morally ambiguous. I strive to present an equal analysis, avoiding predetermined

labels and engaging with both Killmonger's and T'Challa's portrayals within the ideological framework.

This research represents my journey and is expanding my understanding of social justice and its history within the Black community. When I originally saw *Black Panther* in 2018, I noticed comparisons of the two main characters with civil rights activists, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. While valuable for starting my research, I recognize the limitations of these views. My research uses an ideological criticism to go deeper to analyze the characters within the context of the film along with the struggles for Black self-determination.

I engage with scholars like Dixon and Morris who have conducted work that intersects social justice and Black representation in American film, offering tools to analyze *Black Panther's* ideologies. Through this approach, I strive to present an insightful study that shows the complexities of social justice, beyond a simple Black-and-white narrative.

The Artifact

In the world of superhero films, especially in the MCU, few characters have provided the same complexity as *Black Panther's* T'Challa and Killmonger. Beyond their action scenes, both characters are fighting the same fight but in different ways, giving us a conflict worthy of study. *Black Panther* portrays multiple themes of isolationism vs. globalism, tradition vs. modernity, and the lasting impacts of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. T'Challa, a king hiding his country away from the world to protect it, and Killmonger, a soldier resentful of the systematic oppression people of African descent face, represent the same fight for protection but with opposing stances. Examining their motivations, actions, and interactions provides plenty of room for ideological criticism. Their contrasting cultural identities, leadership, and views of social justice led to questions about power, responsibility, and the hardships of navigating through a world

influenced by systematic oppression. By analyzing both characters, researchers can gain an in-depth insight into the continuing conversations about race, social responsibility, and the quest for an equitable world.

Social Context

Black Panther is a film produced in the U.S. during an interesting time in history. The themes of what was happening in the U.S. overlapped with the themes of the movie. In 2018, an African American woman was marrying into one of the oldest monarchies in the world and making headlines, forcing many in the Western world to reconsider what royalty looks like. T'Challa is a King and part of a long line of African royalty, a storyline rarely explored in American cinema. Additionally, political headlines were about the family separation crisis because of President Trump's "zero-tolerance" policy. This is like the backstory of Killmonger, being separated from his family and culture in his early years and the film explores a few of the results of that. With *Black Panther's* emphasis on the importance of family and heritage during a time of forced familial separation, the film offered a new perspective on the importance of family unity.

Beyond the U.S., *Black Panther's* global impact can be attributed to its release aligning with broader socio-political issues, like the #BlackLivesMatter movement and audiences' demand for more diverse narratives in the media. *Black Panther* had a majority Black cast and crew. Led by director Ryan Coogler, the cast and crew were able to draw inspiration from their own experiences in the making of the film. Coogler, a native of Oakland, California, could speak to the hardships of being raised in that environment, like Killmonger. Actress Lupita Nyong'o is the daughter of a Kenyan politician, and has a background of privilege like her character, Nakia. Michael B. Jordan, the actor for Killmonger, has previously worked with Coogler on *Fruitvale*

Station (2013), about the shooting of an unarmed Black man in Oakland, and *Creed (2015)*, the story of a young man trying to live up to his deceased father's legacy. Chadwick Boseman who portrays the titular character, learned Xhosa from John Kani, who plays the deceased King T'Chaka, and uses the language for the film. The authenticity, experiences, and preparations of the cast and crew went to serve as a powerful representation of humanity's diversity. The box office reflected the success of diverse portrayals, with *Black Panther* becoming part of the twenty highest-grossing films of all time and winning over 120 awards for its acting, storytelling, costuming, music, and production.

Surface Content

The film tells the story of T'Challa, the new King of a technologically advanced, African country called Wakanda. Wakanda has control of the most powerful metal on Earth, vibranium. Due to the exploitation of other African countries of the past, Wakanda chooses to be isolated from the rest of the world as an act of protection. T'Challa takes on the role of the Black Panther, a protector of his people Erik "Killmonger" Stevens, T'Challa long lost cousin, wants to take control of Wakanda and its resources as an act of revolution for social reformation. The two cousins fight each other for the role of King. The film uses superhero action sequences, political espionage, and personal conflict as T'Challa deals with tradition, responsibility, and the legacy of colonialism.

Key characters include:

- T'Challa: son of the former King T'Chaka and Queen Romonda, T'Challa is the protagonist and a noble who is struggling between tradition and modernity.
- Killmonger: son of N'Jobu and cousin of T'Challa, Killmonger is the antagonist who is driven by his anger and resentment on his quest for social reformation.

- Shuri: sister of T'Challa, she leads Wakanda's technological advancement.
- Nakia: T'Challa's former lover and a Wakandan spy, believes in helping those who cannot help themselves.
- Okoye: leader of the Dora Milaje, Wakanda's elite female warriors, she represents strength and loyalty.

Embedded Ideologies

Isolationism vs Interventionism: The film's main conflict is figuring out whether Wakanda should come out of isolation and engage with the rest of the world. Before T'Challa became king, Wakanda already had isolationist policies in place to protect the nation from the rest of the world. Killmonger comes into the picture when the question of whether Wakanda should intervene in world politics in promotion of a more equitable future. The isolationist policies both benefit and disadvantage Wakandans and Western nations. Although the Wakandans are protected, they do not have a say in how the world continues, provide aid to those who are systematically oppressed, nor are they able to easily interact with non-Wakandans. Even though Western nations do not have access to Wakandan technology, they can maintain their statuses as leaders of the modern world with Wakanda hiding from the spotlight.

Responsibility and Leadership: The film explores the challenges and burdens of being Wakanda's King with a large amount of power and responsibility. T'Challa's journey highlights the importance of using power wisely and ethically to protect loved ones and those who cannot protect themselves.

Representation and Identity: The film gives multiple perspectives of leadership, within and outside the King. The research will focus on the different leadership between Killmonger and T'Challa, at the beginning and end of the movie. The King who leads Wakanda decides

whether Wakanda will enter the global playing field. Killmonger wants an end to Wakanda's isolationism, "beginning of the movie" T'Challa wants to continue Wakanda's isolation, and "end of the movie" T'Challa ends Wakanda's isolation. Additionally, analysts can see the differing leadership qualities between T'Challa and Killmonger in how they approach tradition and interact with others.

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

Character Backgrounds

When unexposed to the inequality and disadvantages life can bring, leaders don't feel motivated to make changes of oppressive systems in place. Leaders guide both the nobility and proletarians and they can guide most effectively when understanding the struggles of those they are making decisions for. Killmonger was raised as an orphan in Oakland with a lack of resources. Killmonger's location is emphasized because Oakland, CA is a city well known for its crime and poverty rates. These characteristics are further proven when the audience meets Killmonger as a boy playing basketball with his friends (Coogler, 2018, 00:02:02). Two things stand out in this seemingly normal activity: (1) the children are playing basketball without a hoop, instead using a milk crate zip-tied to the backboard, and (2) the sound of not-too-distant police sirens in the background. The boys find their lack of resources and the sound of the police as normal whereas someone not from their environment will find these characteristics as abnormal. Fueled by his underprivileged background, Killmonger's lack of resources and unmet needs shape his desire to empower himself and others at the bottom, specifically those of African descent. His desire for liberation and a better way of life for his community gives him his fierce political ambition - the quest for self-Black determination.

T'Challa was raised with higher access to resources as a prince, secluded from the world behind Wakanda's walls, and with a stable home environment. All of his needs are met and he is content with this. In his first interaction with his sister, Shuri, Shuri wants to improve the performance of her EMP beads, to the discouragement of her brother because they worked fine (00:14:48). T'Challa is displaying a "if it isn't broken, why fix it?" mindset. The EMP beads

worked as they were supposed to so he isn't interested in the elevation or improvement of the device. This situation is an example of T'Challa's needs being met so he is uninterested in how more needs can be met. T'Challa's 'if it isn't broke' mentality aligns with Wakanda's historical decision to retreat from the world after past exploitation. Because Wakanda has thrived in isolation, its self-sufficiency has become a cornerstone of their national identity. T'Challa, raised within these walls, prioritizes Wakanda's lasting independence. He prioritizes Wakanda's lasting independence, believing Wakanda is already fulfilling self-Black determination because of their technological advances and self-sufficiency, even if it means being secluded from the wider African diaspora.

Both sets of father and son are fighting for their own understanding of self-Black determination at direct conflict with each other. T'Challa is more focused on trying to continue the legacy of T'Chaka whereas Killmonger is trying to further the mission of N'Jobu. T'Challa follows his father's steps in keeping Wakanda isolated from the rest of the world, seeing this as the only way to protect their home and remain self-sufficient. N'Jobu was part of the U.S. Black liberation struggles and Killmonger continues his father's fight for Black liberation and empowerment.

T'Challa views his father as a worthy leader and wants to be just like him. Instead of looking to make his reign unique, T'Challa asks T'Chaka's spirit on how to rule just like him. "Tell me how to best protect Wakanda. I want to be a great king, Baba. Just like you" (00:32:36). Striving to be just like T'Chaka, T'Challa's goal is to continue his father's mission for Wakanda. Not everyone agrees with Wakanda's isolationism, like N'Jobu who gives away Wakandan secrets and obtains weapons in the quest for Black liberation. When confronted by T'Chaka for betraying Wakanda, N'Jobu responds "All over the planet, our people suffer because

they don't have the tools to fight back. With vibranium weapons they could overthrow every country and Wakanda could rule them all the right way (01:06:15). Having gone outside of Wakanda and seeing the injustices people of African descent face in the world, N'Jobu wants to free them from systematic oppression with the greatest weapon he knows, vibranium.

After N'Jobu dies, Killmonger continues this mission because he was raised to see vibranium as the only liberator of people of African descent. Both sons are striving to continue the works of their fathers, respectively, but in opposition to each other: protecting Wakanda versus freeing the diasporic.

Cultural Disconnection

Killmonger is culturally disconnected from Wakanda and will never be accepted because of it. After the death of N'Jobu, Killmonger lost his only cultural connection to Wakanda at an early age. He learned about Wakanda from his father's stories and journal, which we can assume to be outdated by twenty to thirty years, or however long Killmonger has been alive. During his coming-of-age years, his ancestry was unable to influence or play a part in his development. The first consideration to his cultural disconnection was the difference in ritual combats: T'Challa versus M'Baku and T'Challa versus Killmonger (00:23:12 and 01:16:59). In the first combat with M'Baku, the occasion was treated as a celebration and a spectacle. The scenes are painted with color, dancing, and singing. Other than the minor Jabari tribe, no one doubted T'Challa's ability to win the combat. Compare this to Killmonger's combat where he opts out of having it treated as a ceremony, disrespecting Wakandan tradition. This combat is not a celebration, but a means to an end, painted as terrifying and suspenseful for the spectators. They were unsure of T'Challa's ability to win this combat, which he seemingly didn't. Even though Killmonger has royal blood, legitimately won the ritual combat, and became King, he is not accepted by the

Wakandans. Nakia attempts to convince Okoye and the Dora Milaje to rebel because “an outsider sits on our throne” (01:23:00). Seemingly, the only requirement to become king is win the ritual combat, which Killmonger did complete making him a legitimate king.

Killmonger is the King of Wakanda, but he is not Wakandan. After winning the ritual combat and becoming king, he ingests the sacred purple herb, gaining the power of the Black panther. Although impressed by his trip to the ancestral plain and his new powers, he orders the shaman to burn the herb (01:28:46). The sacred purple herb has been an integral part of Wakandan culture since Wakanda came into existence, as explained by the opening scenes of the film. The purple herb was also exclusive to the protector of Wakanda, the Black Panther. Killmonger refused to consider the cultural, historical, and symbolic significance of the herb and was further damaging his relations with the Wakandans. During his time in the ancestral plain with his father (01:24:14), this is where the audience gets to see Killmonger as culturally lost, as commented by his father. To which Killmonger responds, “maybe your home is the one that’s lost”. This line shows us that although Killmonger is in Wakanda, it is not home to him. Within this scene, there are two instances where he calls Wakanda N’Jobu’s home, but not his home. Wakandan culture is not his culture and he is refusing to appreciate the culture. In the opening scenes of the film, he refers to Wakanda as “home” (00:00:16). This is the first and last time he calls Wakanda home, when N’Jobu is alive and Killmonger is a child. Killmonger doesn’t refer to any other place “home” after this so it leads to the question of whether he has a place he can call home after the death of his father.

Killmonger’s disrespect towards Wakanda’s culture could be his reaction to T’Chaka killing N’Jobu. When talking about his father’s stories of Wakanda as a child, there was a level of glorification of this beautiful land. Then T’Chaka kills N’Jobu and Killmonger knows it was

T'Chaka. During the council meeting, he yells at T'Challa that T'Chaka is a murderer and he found his father with panther claws in his chest (01:16:01). The murder of his father was a catalyst for Killmonger to take Wakanda off of the pedestal he placed it on. T'Chaka was the king of this utopia and his uncle; this same man killed his father and left Killmonger alone in the world. The king is a representation of Wakandan tradition and by disrespecting Wakanda's traditions, Killmonger is disrespecting his father's murderer.

T'Challa is so deep into Wakandan aristocratic culture that he is unable to empathize with those of other cultures and social classes. T'Challa is not a worldly person, he was raised privileged and safe within Wakanda's borders. The majority of the respectful interactions we see between him and another person is a person of Wakandan aristocracy. Outside of his family, there is Nakia, his love interest and daughter of a member of the Wakandan council; Okoye the head of the king's guards, the Dora Milaje; and W'Kabi, Okoye's husband and head of security for Wakanda's first line of defense, the Border Tribe. T'Challa has shown little compassion towards oppressed people. When T'Challa is going to retrieve Nakia from her spy mission, his technology tells him that Nakia is on the back of a truck with a bunch of other bodies surrounded by militia. In his conversation with Okoye before leaving, the two only talk about their priority, retrieving Nakia (00:07:54). Liberating the other bodies on that truck was not their mission, it was Nakia's. It can be assumed that if Nakia was not on that truck, those women that were also on the truck would not have been freed by T'Challa.

T'Challa struggles to connect with others of African descent because he didn't have to go through the systematic oppression they did. Oppressive experiences bring people together and give them something to fight against. Further proving his disconnection from the world outside of Wakanda, is his conversation on outreach with W'Kabi. T'Challa talks about the possibility

of offering foreign aid and refugee programs which W'Kabi is against. W'Kabi does offer to "clean up the world" as an alternative which T'Challa turns down (00:35:13). T'Challa doesn't give much interest in outreach and more so entertained the idea because Nakia mentioned it. After this conversation with W'Kabi, talks of Wakandan outreach in the world goes away until the presence of Killmonger. When Killmonger arrives during the council meeting and explains that people of African descent need Wakanda's help due to oppression, T'Challa responds, "I am not King of all people. I am King of Wakanda" (01:14:54). With these two scenes, T'Challa is showing he is unable to culturally connect with those who face oppression, especially those of African descent, because they have a different life experience than he did. People can look the same, but have different experiences that tear them away from each other.

In terms of self-Black determination, Killmonger represents a "we all rise together" mentality whereas T'Challa prioritizes Wakanda's self preservation. Throughout the film, Killmonger continuously rejects Wakandan tradition, seeing it as a betrayal to the Black struggle. The isolationist traditions represent a refusal to help others facing oppression in the world. His self-Black determination becomes radical, focused on violent direct action to empower the African diaspora. T'Challa lacks first hand experience of the struggles faced by most Black people so he focuses self-Black determination inward on Wakanda's isolation and security. He believes that Wakanda's success proves self-Black determination can be achieved by staying away from the rest of the world.

Racial Identity

T'Challa's identity is more tied to him being Wakandan than African. The film doesn't explicitly mention what race T'Challa identifies as, but since Wakanda is in Africa, it's natural to follow through on African. This lack of labeling allows T'Challa to focus on his nationality and

the culture it gives him. His identity is consistently reinforced by others throughout the film whenever he is called Prince and King before and after the ritual combat making him King of Wakanda.

An interesting note to consider is the mention of “home”. The word appears thirteen times in *Black Panther*’s script and is usually used as another word for something associated with Wakandan culture, the physical location of Wakanda and the ancestral plane. There is one instance where it is not used to refer to Wakanda, and it’s when N’Jobu finds out Zuri, undercover as James, is a Wakandan spying on him for T’Chaka (00:05:34). N’Jobu felt betrayed by the person he trusted. Earlier in his conversation with T’Chaka and Zuri, N’Jobu called Wakanda “home”, but in the recently mentioned scene he calls his and Killmonger’s Oakland apartment "home ". There could be an argument for Wakanda no longer being “home” after finding out he’s been betrayed by a Wakandan, but there is also a point to be made about N’Jobu’s identity. “Home” is a physical place (Oakland apartment) and culture (Wakandan). By considering both locations as home, N’Jobu has a more complex identity than other Wakandans. As he connected with other Black people in the diaspora, seeing and sharing their struggles, his identity became more complex and this transformation affected Killmonger’s identity formation as a Black man in the world.

Despite knowing his Wakandan heritage, Killmonger’s lived experiences as an African-American give him a more complex racial identity. Within the film, Killmonger shows himself claiming both his Wakandan and African-American heritage, making him the only African-American in the film. When introducing himself in Wakanda, he follows the Wakandan greeting of [title + name], son of [title+name], “I am N’Jadaka, son of Prince N’Jobu” (01:15:50). Identifying himself as Wakandan, but also as the son of an aristocrat brings him legitimacy in

Wakanda. Also, he recognizes participating in the ritual combat for kingship as his blood right due to his royal Wakandan blood (01:16:18). Despite being in Wakanda for the first time, Killmonger is aware of his legal rights within Wakanda and is actively participating in the culture.

In addition, on his deathbed, he identifies himself as “a kid from Oakland”, showcasing his upbringing and connection to the African diaspora (1:56:30). His connection to the African diaspora is part of what’s fueling his fight for Black liberation because he is showing his anger toward the systematic oppression faced by Black people. During a heated meeting at the Wakandan tribal room, Killmonger confronts the leaders about Wakanda’s absence in global events “...Where I’m from, when Black folks started revolutions, they never had the firepower or resources to fight their oppressors (01:29:42). Killmonger’s rage stems from witnessing and experiencing the struggles of the Black communities in the U.S., a highly global country. Killmonger is connected to every person of African descent and claims them by calling them his brothers and sisters (01:18:45) and even claiming past slaves as his ancestors (01:58:08). The ancestry claim is significant because, allegedly, Wakandans were not enslaved due to their isolationism.

Self-Black determination isn’t a monolithic experience; it’s formulated through life experiences, cultural connections, and the realities of racial oppression. T’Challa and Killmonger represent different facets of Black identity, showing the complexity of self-Black determination. Killmonger’s forced disconnection from Wakanda lead to him witnessing firsthand the systematic oppression faced by Black people, fueling his self-Black determination. T’Challa’s identity is more focused within Wakandan specific history and culture, manifesting his self-Black determination as protecting Wakanda’s autonomy and society.

Power Dynamics

Although misunderstood by most audiences, Killmonger isn't fighting for peace, he's fighting for power. His way of obtaining power is through knowledge and violence. Killmonger attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) for graduate school, the same university Tony Stark/Iron Man graduated from. His time as a military operative honed his combat skills and gave him knowledge of military tactics that can be used to destabilize and wipe out governments (01:12:55). No one can say that Killmonger is unintelligent. His power is not just his body but his knowledge and that's what makes him a threat. In the museum scene, his intimidating nature in combination with his knowledge of the artifacts makes the curator uncomfortable, transferring the power from the supposed artifact expert to a random person. By being more knowledgeable, he is implying that what she studied and is an expert at is wrong. Additionally, due to his Wakandan knowledge, he can identify vibranium and holds the upper hand in his relationship with Klaue (00:18:17). This relationship with Klaue is a parallel with N'Jobu's relationship with Klaue many years before. The difference being N'Jobu was helping Klaue get vibranium within Wakanda while Killmonger is helping him find it outside of Wakanda. In the Wakandan council room, he flexed having a knowledge that the other Wakandans didn't have, his identity (01:15:28). Killmonger's knowledge of the rest of the world tells him peace isn't an option, power is. So with his combat skills and knowledge, he gains power.

The film also displays the power of the aristocracy when it comes to traditional leadership. Killmonger became King of Wakanda and controlled the military, but Nakia would not support him. To reiterate, Nakia is a member of the Wakandan aristocracy and the aristocracy serves on a council to advise the king. Without the support of the aristocracy, it's

difficult to rule in an aristocratic society. Nakia stole the purple herb to find a new Black Panther with the goal of overthrowing Killmonger (01:31:34). To her relief, she was able to give it to T'Challa to not only save his life, but to also continue the ritual combat between himself and Killmonger.

At the end of the film, T'Challa opens Wakanda up to the rest of the world, but is still striving for power through vibranium, and without the use of violence. Throughout the film, T'Challa has been against vibranium leaving Wakanda and it ending up in the hands of an outsider because he knows it'll be used to make weapons. He knows this because when Klaue attacked Wakanda on N'Jobu's information in 1992, that vibranium was used for weapons and Klaue is a known arms dealer. As stated in the background, vibranium is a powerful metal and can make powerful technology and military advances. Because of its potential, every country wants vibranium for their military but it can only be found in Wakanda. When Killmonger tells Klaue to sell the vibranium from the museum fast, Klaue tells him it's not an issue (00:18:44). Later, Klaue goes and tries to sell the vibranium to an American government official (00:43:52). These scenes show how valuable vibranium is and by monitoring vibranium, Wakanda is keeping a powerful upper hand because they see it as theirs. vibranium didn't land in the world, it landed in Wakanda. T'Challa and Wakanda keep an upper hand on the rest of the world by conserving and protecting their vibranium. With Wakanda having the strongest metal on Earth and the knowledge of how to use it effectively, other countries know Wakanda can fight back and hold their own in a war.

Black Panther presents a conflict between knowledge and technology, specifically vibranium, exemplified by the Killmonger and T'Challa, respectively. Killmonger believes his Wakandan knowledge can help lead to empowerment whereas T'Challa sees technology as the

source for self-Black determination. Although T'Challa is not incorrect in his view of vibranium being a power source, he is relying on a power source that is inaccessible to the wider Black community. Because of the accessibility issues with vibranium, this leads to questions of the accessibility of resources to achieve self-Black determination.

Social Justice

T'Challa and Killmonger have differing views on how to achieve liberation in the world. T'Challa ideology includes a nonviolent approach whereas Killmonger uses acts of violence and manipulation as his means to an end. T'Challa's leadership is shown as benevolent because he is willing to consult advisors and others' perspectives before making decisions. Killmonger is displayed as more of a tyrannical leader that is radical in his approach and only listens to himself. The contrasting ideologies between T'Challa and Killmonger resonate within the context of the 1960s American Civil Right Movement, drawing a parallel between them and the iconic figures of the era, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. King is celebrated for his nonviolent approach, church support, and advocacy for peaceful resistance, offering resources to the Black community. His approach involved integrating with the existing system that put Blacks at a disadvantage, rather than challenging it. In contrast, Malcom X's more radical and "an eye for an eye" ideology promoted retaliation against oppressors and the assertion of Black empowerment.

Killmonger associates liberation and justice with violent direct action. As stated earlier, Killmonger's father, N'Jobu wanted to use weapons to liberate Black bodies. Additionally, Killmonger is from Oakland, CA, the home of the Black Panther Resistance Party where the party encouraged Black people to carry weapons to protect themselves. This is the environment Killmonger is raised in. We can see the effects of his upbringing during the British Museum scene where we first meet Killmonger. He has an intimidating aura, putting the museum curator

at unease and immediately paints himself as the villain of the story. In order to remove a misidentified Wakandan artifact from the museum to sell on the Black market, he aids in the murder of the curator and guards (00:16:55). In Killmonger's eyes, it is more beneficial to permanently remove his obstacles than work around them. He keeps showing his willingness to sacrifice people to reach his end goal. During his fight with Klaue, Klaue takes Killmonger's love interest, Linda, as a shield from Killmonger's gun. Killmonger shoots Linda without hesitation so that Klaue can't hold anyone against him (01:02:41). Killing Klaue is a step in Killmonger's quest to rule Wakanda.

There is not enough room for both T'Challa and Killmonger. Killmonger wants to be King of Wakanda to liberate Black bodies and T'Challa wants to remove Killmonger as King. For one of them to be successful, the other has to lose. In their final battle, Killmonger is fatally wounded and refuses T'Challa's help. He speaks his famous last lines, "Bury me in the ocean, with my ancestors that jumped from the ships... 'cause they knew death was better than bondage" (01:56:30). Killmonger couldn't see a way for liberation to happen without his methods and tactics so he'd rather tap out of life than suffer further.

T'Challa strives for reformation to correct the wrongs of his ancestors through nonviolent direct action. Before Killmonger's presence, T'Challa hasn't shown a full dedication to global social reformation. Through his interactions with Killmonger while battling for his life, T'Challa starts to have a change of mentality. Confronting T'Chaka about leaving behind Killmonger after the murder of N'Jobu, T'Challa calls Killmonger a monster of their own creation. T'Chaka justifies leaving Killmonger behind as an act to protect Wakanda, but T'Challa calls his father wrong for this. Additionally, T'Challa tells his ancestors they were wrong for turning their backs on the world, stopping them from doing what's right because they were scared (01:37:04). This

scene is significant because this is when T'Challa takes his father off of the pedestal he had him on and vows to lead according to his own values and not do what was done in the past. After the death of Killmonger, T'Challa opens an International Outreach Center in Oakland where Killmonger and N'Jobu used to live and opens Wakanda to share resources and knowledge with the rest of the world. T'Challa hasn't said in the film if he was willing to share vibranium, but considering his quest for peace and harmony, it can be assumed he will not allow the sharing of weapons or anything that can be used to cause further oppression.

It's important to note the portrayal and perception of both King and Malcom X significantly differ in media representation. While King's peaceful image remains relatively unaltered in film, the portrayal of Malcom X often has adjustments to align with white audiences' expectations, as discussed in the literature review. Similar to King and Malcolm X, T'Challa and Killmonger have an image throughout the entire film where T'Challa is portrayed as upstanding and Killmonger as tyrannical. By giving both characters contrasting images, it makes it harder to understand both characters are fighting for the same thing, self-Black determination. Instead, it seems like they are fighting each other by being foils of each other, similar to media representations of Malcolm X and King.

Black Panther offers a compelling exploration of the acceptable forms of social justice, with T'Challa symbolizing survival and liberation, while Killmonger represents a willingness to sacrifice. Hollywood's efforts to make social justice narratives more palatable for diverse audiences become evident through T'Challa's non-confrontational stance, which helps alleviate white guilt. His character refrains from overtly blaming Western society for the plight of the oppressed and instead focuses on promoting understanding and change. In contrast, Killmonger's agenda involves subjugating non-Black individuals using Western tactics, underlining the

potential for criticism in a narrative that diverges from these expectations. The film's contrasting portrayals of these two ideologies serve as a reflection of the ongoing discourse on social justice, reiterating the complexities of acceptable approaches to addressing racial injustice and other societal inequalities.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The research and analysis of *Black Panther* has constructed an ideological criticism. It was examined for its dynamic examples of self-Black determination as portrayed by the main characters, T'Challa and Killmonger. Additionally, the analysis gave evidence from scenes and discourse in the film, supporting the goals of self-Black determination in the characters' backgrounds, cultural dis/connection, racial identities, power dynamics, and mission for social justice. The findings were built on the entirety of the first *Black Panther* film, including the script. The film was analyzed based on character actions, appearances, and dialogues which provided evidence as to the characters' ultimate goals.

By applying ideological criticism, my thesis was able to take a look at the differing portrayals of self-Black determination throughout the film and how it contributes to a broader understanding of the film's impact. The powerful representation of Wakanda and its descendents resonated with audiences who saw themselves in these characters, especially in the topics of race, identity, and social justice. This thesis adds to the critical discourse by demonstrating how *Black Panther's* portrayals of self-Black determination empowers marginalized communities, especially those of African descent, and challenges dominant Hollywood narratives.

Further research into *Black Panther* could examine how Afrofuturism is used in the film compared to other Afrofuturistic films. Additionally, there could be research into how audiences of differing racial backgrounds interpret *Black Panther's* message of self-determination and other films with varying portrayals of self-Black determination.

In conclusion, the analysis of self-Black determination in *Black Panther* offers insights beyond the world of Hollywood cinema. Understanding how communities strive for self-

reliance, cultural identity, and the lengths they would go through to achieve it can inform real-world issues such as Black social justice movements and economic empowerment initiatives.

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